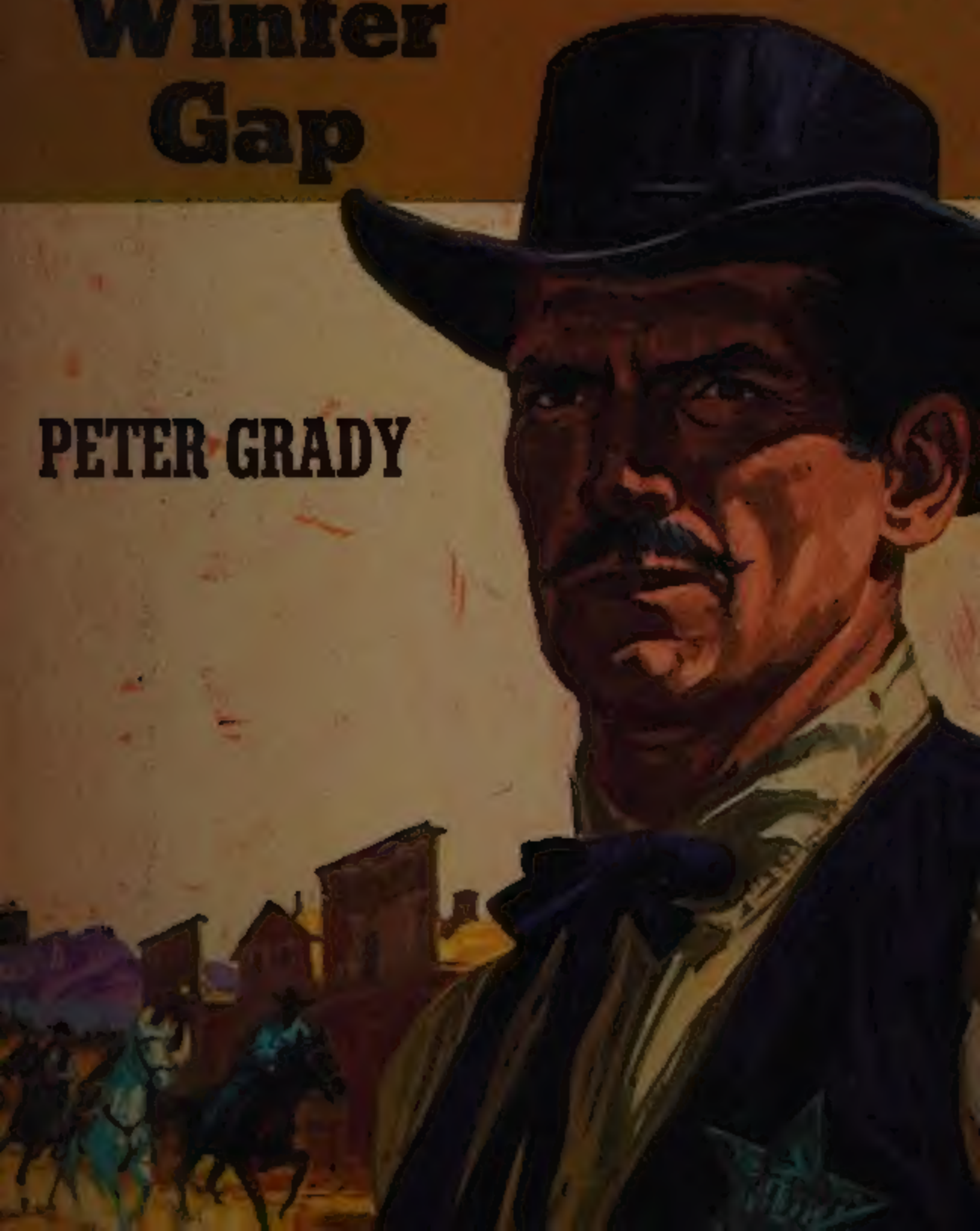


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The Marshal of Winter Gap

Brutal tragedy
turns a peaceful
rancher into a
vengeful lawman.

PETER GRADY



THE MARSHAL of WINTER GAP

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THE MARSHAL
of
WINTER GAP

ONE

SAM BISHOP figured that the vagaries of spring were no more predictable than the moods of a woman. He stood tall and straight, just beyond the wet coolness of the timber-covered slopes of the canyon. Ahead of him, as far as his eyes could see, was the new greenness, the lush splendor, the sweet smell of the grass, where only days before was the bleakness of winter against an endless bed of snow.

Roaming through the new grass were the three hundred head of cattle he'd bought only a year ago, and still young stuff. By autumn, his cattle would pasture in the fields closer to the ranch house. And then they'd all be together—the land, cattle, his house and barn. But most important, his wife and son.

No one had a right to disturb thoughts here and he felt just a trifle irritated when his nine-year-old son tugged at his pants leg again.

"Ma said she'd be ready in half an hour, Pa. That was near an hour ago. You coming?"

Sam Bishop picked up his son Jason and set him on the saddle. He boarded the mouse-colored horse himself and rode down from the slopes of the canyon to the level country. The ride took him closer to the cattle and he felt a glow of pride in the way they were developing, and he didn't miss the calves, dropped only days before. They were sturdy looking little animals. No scrubs here—there wasn't a trace of wild or tainted blood on his range.

Young Jason twisted his tow-colored head around and flashed one of his big grins at Sam. "All I'm saying is you better move faster, Pa."

"Why's she in such an all-fired rush to go into town this early in the week?"

"Miz Edwards came by and said Cy Bentley got in some new stuff at the store. To make dresses and things."

"Oh," Sam nodded. "Well, I guess that's important enough, eh, Jase?"

"Sure is—if Ma says so."

Sam ruffled the already tousled head of his son and touched the spurs lightly so that they were soon moving faster over the green land toward his ranch where the barn was painted red, as barns should be, and the house was a medium shade of blue. Paint on a house was an innovation, but Amanda had insisted on it and Sam had to admit it looked nice against its green background of the grass and the lighter blueness of the sky.

This was what he'd sought for through all those wild years. This was what his muscle and his stamina—and his gun—had earned. This was security, a chance at peace. A lovely woman who loved him, and a son who gave great promise in both wisdom and strength. Sam thought perhaps the strength had been his, but hardly the wisdom. Jase knew more at nine than Sam had known at twenty-five. In ten years they'd accomplished much, but it was Amanda's foresight which had made it all come true, so if Jase was wise, his wisdom came from his mother.

Like his son, Sam was tow-headed and blue-eyed, but Jase had Amanda's finely chiseled features, and a grace of movement that Sam had only in his gun hand. Or once had. The boy was apparently going to be as tall as Sam's five-feet ten, and slim and wiry. Sam hoped he'd have the patience of his mother and not the wild impetuosity that had once cursed him.

The boy peered ahead and saw the buckboard ready and waiting. He said, "Ma's hitched up and she's going to be mad, we don't get this nag running faster."

Sam got the nag running at top speed and he whooped and hollered to let Amanda know they were coming. She stepped out of the kitchen and she was ready. Her dark dress and side hat would be dusty by the time they reached town, but no dust would take away any of the beauty of her black hair and her deep brown eyes, which sometimes had a habit of looking out so far into the future that Sam worried about it. There were times, in the deceptive weakness of the lamplight, when he thought she was looking beyond life itself. On those times there was a sadness about her that alarmed him and kept him awake nights, even when his whole body ached from the pain of too much work. He'd draw her to him then, a heavy protective arm about her that did not seem heavy to her.

Sometimes, when he was riding fence or on some lonely

hunt for mavericks, he'd wonder what he'd do if he ever lost her. Of course the idea was preposterous because she was healthy as he, she worked hard and suffered no harm from it, and she was easy in mind, for things were going well. The old worry—about Sam and his gun—had ceased long ago.

When he saw her now, his heart missed a beat as it usually did, and he breathed rather hard once or twice. Then he waved, and Jase nearly fell off the horse using both hands to fan the air in greeting.

"There are pot roast sandwiches and cold buttermilk," she said. "Wash up first. A clean shirt, Jason, and I'm going to inspect your ears before we leave. Hurry now, both of you."

Sam stopped to take her in his arms and kiss her, even while Jason looked on, grinning. There were folks who said the young-uns shouldn't see such goings-on, but Amanda and Sam had never thought that way. It was good for a child to know that his parents loved one another.

"Out in the canyon," Sam said happily, "we've got a herd of the finest. We picked the right place, Amanda. There's no better in the whole goldarned State of Montana."

"Yes," she said, and that faraway look came into her eyes again. "I know, Sam. It's going to be just fine. I . . . haven't paid much attention lately, being winter and all, and I've been edgy since the chinook. I can't seem to settle down."

"You better take a nip out of that bottle of sulphur you give to Jase every spring," Sam chuckled. "Pay no mind to it, Amanda. The warm weather and the sunshine will take care of everything. And I think enough goods for maybe—three new dresses, might help? And a new hat? It's got to sit on the side of your head, just like this one you've got on. You look mighty fetching with that hat."

She smiled at him and touched his face, but then they had to get busy. While she did up the few remaining chores, Sam and Jase ate their sandwiches, drank their buttermilk and found half a pie in the pantry to top it all off. They were waiting on the buckboard seat when Amanda came out again. Jase raised his feet, spun around on his bottom, shot off the seat and onto the back of the buckboard. Sam helped Amanda and then he clucked at the horses and they jolted down the farm lane to the stage road, which wasn't much smoother.

It was a thirty-five-minute ride to town and it was always nice to watch the houses come into view. They knew every

living soul who resided under these roofs and even if nobody was about, the house itself made them feel as if they were meeting old friends.

"I do hope none of those wild, drunken trail hands are in town today," Amanda said.

"They'll pay no mind to a pretty girl like you, unless they want a fist in their face," Sam said gaily. "And I'll see that you'll be kept safe."

"I just don't like all that fighting," she said. "I think the town needs a marshal. It's a disgrace that there isn't one."

Sam shrugged. "After what happened to old Myron Amister, nobody wants the job."

"Well, Mr. Amister should have been an example for any man who wants to wear a badge."

Jason, boylike, missed none of this. "Ma," he asked, "is it true that Mr. Amister got his lawman's badge busted by a bullet?"

"Yes, Jason, it is. Mr. Amister was a very brave man."

"Some say he was foolhardy," Sam observed, "to stand up and fight when he had no chance. But the way I see it—"

"Mr. Amister wore his badge with pride, Sam. He was brave, not foolhardy."

"Just what I was about to say," Sam grinned, "but I didn't get the chance."

"Louise keeps that badge to remind herself that her father died bravely," Amanda said. "And that reminds me—we'll stop by Louise's bakeshop and buy what we need."

"Now or when we're ready to go back?"

"Now—before her baking is bought by someone else."

"Ma, can I have some of the jelly tarts?" Jason asked.

"You can have all you can eat," Sam said. He glanced at Amanda. "I could tend to buying the bakery things, you know. Louise is a right pretty girl and it'd be a fine way of spending a little time while you and Jason are gallivanting . . ."

He couldn't tease Amanda by trying to make her jealous. She knew him too well for that, but she shushed him anyway, saying Jason shouldn't hear things like that.

Louise Amister had opened her bakery right after her father had been shot down. At first, folks bought her bread and pies and cakes because they felt sorry for her and had a vaguely guilty idea they might possibly owe something to the memory of her father. But then they came regularly because

the bakery was good and in no time Louise had a firmly established business.

She was glad to see them, especially Amanda whom she liked so much. Sam and Jason stood aside while the two women talked eagerly about all the things which had happened since they'd last met. Sam liked Louise. Not the way he admired Amanda, but as he had said, Louise was a right pretty girl. Jason adored her because she always gave him a jelly tart or two and didn't care if he smeared some of the jelly on the well-scrubbed counter.

"I'll keep what you bought here until you're ready to ride home," Louise said. "That way, they'll stay hot right to the last minute. And I might find time to spread just a little extra jelly on another tart for Jase. He'll need something to fortify himself for the trip back."

Jason thanked her politely, and privately thought he could eat that tart right now. Sam nodded in friendly fashion. Louise had a dab of flour down her right cheek. He thought it funny to see, but he didn't say anything. She'd certainly grown into an attractive girl. The color of her eyes seemed to have deepened and she'd filled out well.

Then he and his small family walked down the wooden sidewalk of Main Street. Somebody bellowed a threat in one of the saloons, and other voices defied the bellow and the yelling became louder.

"It's a disgrace," Amanda repeated, "that we don't have a marshal."

"No skin off us," Sam said. "We don't come to town very often."

"Well, I hope they don't bother me," she said. "Or—rile you," she amended judiciously.

"Don't even pack a gun any more," he said lightly. "No need for one. Most of the rough-house is at night, anyway. We'll be on our way back before dark. That is, if you don't take too long picking out the stuff for your dresses."

They began moving down the main street of Winter Gap. Sam thought that was about the silliest name for a town he'd ever heard, but he knew the folks who settled it had to put down their stakes in this spot because the winter came roaring through the canyons and over the limitless prairies. They'd called it Winter Gap, maybe without much thinking. But when they decided to stay, the name stuck.

It was a town destined to grow because of its location. On

one side, twenty miles distant, a mountain range sent water spilling down to irrigate the fertile valleys and the prairie, which faced in the town on the other three sides. As far as anyone could see, there was only lush, green pasture that would fatten the skinniest steers. The land could be plowed and seeded for the finest crops ever grown. Here was everything, and here was the town, in the middle of it all. No wonder more and more settlers trickled in, and in a year's time, perhaps thirty new families came to Winter Gap.

The town drew herders and punchers from miles around. These were strictly transient, here to spend money and raise hell. Sometimes Winter Gap looked slightly tilted when they left, but things straightened out and nobody complained too much. It was a free and easy town.

Now and then some cold-eyed, professional gunman would drift in, but he found little welcome. He was treated civilly, but he soon went on his way. No man here had a tough gun-reputation to beat. Nobody wanted to fight him; there was simply nothing here for a gun-proud to do.

All in all, it wasn't a bad little town, and Sam Bishop liked it. He supposed everyone here knew what he'd once been, but they asked no questions and accepted him at face value. That had originally been because of Amanda, he knew. Then Jason had come along and cemented the relationship between man and town. Sam had proven himself since, of course, and he had nothing but friends in Winter Gap.

He hauled up the buckboard across the street from Forbes's general store and Jase was off the tailboard and hurrying to help Amanda down. She brushed dust from her dress after she stood on the wooden sidewalk beside the wagon. She smiled up at Sam.

"I'll need about an hour," she said, "and I'm taking Jason with me."

"Aw, Ma," Jason complained.

"You're not old enough to make the rounds with your father yet," Amanda said. She turned back after taking a few steps. "Oh, Sam—don't forget the wire for my morning-glories."

"I won't," he promised, though he certainly had. He sat on the wagon seat watching her cross the dusty street and he was filled with pride because he belonged to her and the sturdy, protesting boy whose hand she held, belonged to them. He smiled in simple contentment, and then thought

about the things he must buy. There was a list somewhere in his pockets; he was fumbling for it as he climbed down off the wagon and started along the boardwalk.

He passed by the saloon—Charlie Mooregrove's place—and the smell tantalized him, but he didn't weaken. He'd spent too much of his life in those places, squandering his money, priming himself for trouble, and generally finding it. Those were days he'd as soon forget and he silently damned the smell of beer and whiskey that brought them back.

In the butcher shop he bought what he needed: Jerked beef, hams, bacon, a little lamb—though most cattlemen would starve before they'd allow it in their homes. Amanda had grown up with a taste for a fine lamb leg, properly roasted, and Sam ate it and after a while he didn't feel like a pariah.

At the hardware store he bought some blasting powder and caps, the wire for Amanda's morning-glory vines, and took along a long-handled, slim shovel for digging post holes. A supply of staples and various-sized nails filled his needs here and he ambled back to the wagon to stow away his more recent purchases.

He saw "Judge" Frank Glover come sweeping down the street, bowing, tipping his hat to all womenfolk, saluting the men and the children. He wore riding boots with corduroy pants tucked into them, a twill jacket with a fancy checked vest underneath, and a heavy gold watch chain to give visible indication of his affluence. Everybody called him judge, not because he was a lawyer or a jurist or could even read a law book intelligently. He merely looked like the popular conception of a judge and so he was called that and he tried to live up to the title. He was a big blow-hard, a complete fraud, and he didn't have an enemy in the world.

"Well, well, Sam Bishop." He offered his hand with his usual flourish. "Glad to see you, boy. Most happy to see you looking so well. Amanda and Jason, I trust, are in as fine health?"

"Amanda's buying dress goods," Sam said, and added, simply to impress the man, "Enough for three dresses. And a new hat. Jase is with her."

"And you're doing the town," the Judge said. "Well, that's fine. I think it calls for a drink, my boy. Don't often get to drink with you, Sam."

"Not now," Sam said. "Almost time to leave."

Somebody in the saloon four doors down the street, cried out a furious oath and there came sounds of a fight. Sam grinned.

"Reckon that'd be no place to go for a quiet drink right now, Judge."

The Judge scowled, befitting a man of dignity who disliked violence. He muttered something and marched down the street as if he meant to interfere and silence the racket, but he only hesitated near the door and when a chair crashed inside, he went on a bit faster. Sam climbed onto the wagon, pushed his hat to the back of his head and looked up at the sun, wondering how long he'd have to wait.

His back was toward the saloon, but he heard the violence increase and there was a gunshot. At that moment Amanda emerged from the dry goods store, holding Jason's hand. He carried a large package under his other arm and they moved off the sidewalk and across the road toward the buckboard.

There was another shot. For a moment, Sam thought Amanda had only stopped to look. Sam swung around. Two men had erupted from the saloon, both had drawn guns. The one facing Sam had fired, for wisps of smoke still curled from the barrel. His opponent must have seen something on the gunman's face, for he twisted his head. He transferred his gaze to Sam, sitting on the wagon, and suddenly he began running for the nearest alley. The man with the smoking gun just stood there.

Sam heard Jason scream. It was a boy's yell, high-pitched, like that of an animal caught in a painful trap. Sam swung back. He saw Amanda on the ground. Jason stood beside her. She still held his hand tightly. Sam could see the black hole between her eyes. Mercifully, he couldn't see what was left of the back of her head for she'd been bowled over by the force of the slug.

Sam leaped off the wagon. A woman screamed. Someone shouted a curse and there were more cries. He heard none of them. He ran to Amanda and bent over her. He didn't even have eyes for his son at that moment. He didn't notice how Jason was trying to pull free of the dead woman's hand. Trying gently, as if she were alive and would resent his attempts to get loose. His face was a white mask, broken only by two big tears that rolled down his cheeks.

Sam didn't have to look at the face of his wife more than a second to know the truth. It hit him hard - like a sledge-

but not quite hard enough. Possibly because he was no stranger to this sort of thing. He straightened up. Unconsciously his right hand turned into a claw and slapped at his thigh, only to find it empty of gun or holster, and he was jolted back into the present.

He looked down the street. The man with the drawn gun stood there, spraddle-legged, staring straight ahead. Sam walked slowly toward him. The man stood his ground. The gun came up slightly, warningly. People on the sidewalks moved to get out of the way.

Sam's steps were like those of a man with two wooden legs. He kept moving closer . . . closer.

He said, "That was my wife. I'm going to kill you, Hodge. That was my wife. You have no further right to live."

"Haul up, Sam," the man with the gun said tautly. "Sam—it was an accident. I didn't mean . . ."

"No further right to live," Sam repeated and kept moving.

The gun came level. "Sam—stop. I'll have to shoot if you don't, Sam!"

But even Hodge, slightly sobered by now, knew this was no man coming to kill him, it was a machine sparked with the fuel of hatred and dulled with shock at the loss of someone he loved. He would kill—this robot. He'd do it automatically, without feeling. He wouldn't stop, once his hands found the gunman's throat.

"Sam! I swear I'll shoot . . ."

The gun fired. At the last moment the man brought the weapon slanting downward, aiming for the leg. The bullet hit Sam in the thigh. It was a heavy bullet, and it severed the vein deep in the thigh that carried most of the blood. Sam staggered a step or two, but he didn't go down. After a second, his wounded leg began moving again. If he felt any pain, he didn't show it. With each step, blood spurted out of the wound. Sam was already suffering a massive hemorrhage. A wound of this kind, unattended for only three or four minutes, could kill him from loss of blood.

Sam's both hands reached for the gunman. Possibly, even this soon, the loss of blood had weakened his sense of sight, because he wasn't close enough when his hands went out. The gunman didn't back off. He merely raised the heavy gun he held, stepped closer and clubbed Sam across the forehead with .

Sam dropped to his knees and stayed there a moment before he pitched forward and lay still. The gunman holstered his sixgun and fled.

Farther back, in the middle of the road, Jason stood still, held by that iron clutch of his dead mother's hand. Suddenly he screamed again, and kept screaming. His mother wouldn't let go. His father was apparently dead, gunned down. It was more than one small boy could take.

He kept on screaming and it was the weirdness of the cry that finally broke the stunned silence which gripped everyone who watched.

Suddenly Louise Amister jumped down off the sidewalk and raced to where Sam lay. Someone else went to help Jason. Still another went for the doctor and in the saloon, a table was being cleared to receive Sam's body for treatment.

TWO

OUT of the darkness and the near oblivion, came hands that were soft and smelled of perfumed soap. He tried to grasp at something solid in his mind, with which to haul himself back. There was nothing—just the black emptiness and the soft hands.

"Amanda," he whispered. "Amanda, I'm glad you came."

The woman's voice said, "It's all right, Sam. Everything's all right."

He could feel the corners of his mouth twitch as he tried to fashion them into a smile. He hoped he had succeeded. But it worried him, remotely, that this hadn't been Amanda's voice. Her hands, yes, but the perfume and the voice, they were different. He tried to go back to them, to ask what this was all about and where in tarnation he was, in this inky vastness of space. All he could do was sigh deeply and wonder why his leg ached so goddamned much.

When he tried again—some twenty hours later—he came a little further out of the valley. This time his eyes could

face is, but dimly, and while he was sure he knew who that hazy looking girl was, it seemed impossible to identify her. Except that she wasn't Amanda. He'd know Amanda, even in the deepest of the depths from which he was slowly emerging.

"Well, now," that same vaguely remembered voice said gently, "you've got your eyes finally open and that's a wonderful sign. You'll be all right, Sam." She bent over him. To his eyes, she grew hazier. She went on talking. "Now you remember me, Sam. I'm Louise Amister."

"Hello . . . Louise . . ." he managed. There was so much he wanted to know, but he did not have the strength to ask.

She lifted his head and he could feel the warm, sweet breath of her as she pushed the pillow so that he was more comfortable when she gently lowered him. He groped blindly for her hand, needing something to cling to. Her fingers closed over his and she sat there for two hours without moving, without trying to withdraw her hand which had gone to sleep, and the numbness had penetrated clear up to the shoulder.

Sam knew her. It seemed he'd always known Louise because she'd been just a black-haired imp of a little girl when he first rode into town. He'd watched her grow and the black hair had lightened somehow to an auburn that she could arrange in any number of different ways, for it was soft and naturally curly and obedient to whatever style she chose for that day. At the moment, it was shoulder length, brushed to a high sheen, and that was all. She had the bluest of eyes and a fine face that a man could call beautiful without any reservation. She was a trim package, not more than five feet five, but sturdy and, in her own way, as solid as Sam.

Preparatory to opening his eyes again, his grip on her hand relaxed and she gently pulled herself free of him and rubbed her arm while she gasped in sudden pain as the blood raced down through veins that had been partially blocked. Then she forgot about the arm because this time he was going to awaken and stay awake long enough to ask questions. What she had to tell him was more than a man could rightfully take—or a woman tell without blubbering. She steeled herself against it.

His eyes were wide open when she looked again and she

knew he was completely back in the world where he belonged, and with his return came the bitter memories which unconsciousness had mercifully withheld from him, until he could bear them.

"Is Amanda dead?" he asked.

She nodded slowly. It was better this way. He took the reins and led her. The shock might be greater, but it would be over more quickly.

"Jase?"

"He's fine, Sam."

"How long—have I been here?" His head turned slightly. "Reckon I don't even know where I am."

"My house. You do know me?"

"Yes—Louise Amister. You're a nice girl, Louise. Amanda says . . ." He puckered up his lips in a grimace of pain. The first of so much, he often felt like giving up. "I mean . . . she used to say you were a nice girl."

"Sam, do you feel strong enough now to hear all of it?"

"I'm all right. I want to know."

"Hodge Bundy was the one. The man who fired. Sam, he didn't mean to. He didn't even see Amanda."

"He saw me," Sam said, in a voice that was ice cold, even in its weakness.

"You were going to kill him. He could have cut you down, but he only wanted to stop you. The bullet hit your leg. You nearly bled to death. But you kept going for him so he buffaloed you with his gun. Sam—that's all he could do."

"He still in town?"

"You know better than that. He high-tailed it before we even got to your side. Now that's all there is. Except—we took care of things. Amanda . . ."

"How many days have I been like this?"

"Almost a week."

"A week?" he exclaimed.

"We didn't think you'd pull through at first, you lost so much blood. Sam . . . Shall I tell you about—Amanda?"

"Yes."

"We buried her alongside my father, up there on the bluff overlooking the whole valley. I . . . just didn't want her buried in Boot Hill. It just wasn't fit for the likes of her. So I put her up with Pa. I think she'd have liked that. They were good friends, Sam."

"I know the place," Sam said. "I'm beholden to you, Louise. I will be for the rest of my life. I feel easier, knowing you handled everything."

"I'm glad, Sam. Now, I've got some chicken soup simmering for so long it's getting thick. It's about time you had some. We poured a little down your throat when you were unconscious. You're a mighty stubborn man. We had us a heck of a time, trying to feed you."

"Try me now," Sam said. "I want my strength back as fast as I can get it."

He was comforted by the small sounds of her movements as she worked around the kitchen. They were the same sounds Amanda used to make. The rattle of pans, the scrape of a spoon and the clatter of dishes.

He accepted Amanda's death because he remembered so well—and with such horror—how she'd looked lying there in the dust of Main Street. He supposed there'd be nothing to do except bury her while he lay unconscious and almost dead. He didn't worry about Jase. The boy could take fine care of himself. He did hope he was taking this well. It was a terrible challenge for a nine-year-old. If only the boy hadn't seen her shot down.

Sam's strong hands clenched tightly in this bitterness. Two fool men, fighting drunk, drawing guns—and someone like Amanda had to be the one to die. He had a foggy memory of trying to reach the man with the gun, but he didn't know if he'd succeeded. He rather hoped he hadn't. The pleasure of that moment should be reserved for a time when he was in full possession of his senses.

To keep himself from thinking too much, he tried turning the bed covers down and swinging his leg off the edge. He saw that it was heavily bandaged, and expertly, which meant Doc Evans had tended him. Still, Sam couldn't understand why a bullet through the leg had almost killed him.

When the rush of blood went down into the leg, swelling the vein against the tight bandage, he let out an involuntary cry of pain. It brought Louise in a hurry, holding a saucepan of steaming soup in one hand, a spoon in the other. He smiled at her sheepishly.

"You get back into that bed," she commanded. "Sam Bishop, do you want to undo all the doctor's work?"

"No, ma'am," he said meekly, and settled back, pulling

up the covers. "Nor all the work you did, either. I got me a strong idea you did most of it."

"You just stay in that bed," she said sharply, but he could see that she was pleased to hear him recognize her efforts.

"I'm likely to," he said. "Way the leg felt just now."

She didn't insult him, as he was afraid she might, by hand-feeding him the soup, but she did pull up a chair and sat there, keeping him company. The thick yellow chicken broth with rice tasted just fine. He ate three bowls of it, and that made Louise feel fine, too.

"You got time to sit for a while?" he asked.

"All the time there is," she said. "Mrs. Payley is tending my store. Doc thought I'd mostly better stay with you."

"I'll see you're paid for it," he said proudly.

"Oh, shucks," she derided. "There's no reason to talk about paying me. I'm just glad you're alive."

"What happened to me, Louise?"

"It was the bullet that hit you in the thigh. Doc said it broke the big vein—he called it some name or other—and you nearly bled to death. If the vein wasn't involved, there wouldn't have been much to it."

"And Amanda?"

Louise put down the empty bowl. "Like I said, we buried her up there on the bluff with Pa. Everybody turned out, except me. I stayed here with you."

"And Hodge? What happened to him?"

"He ran off, that's all. Who'd stop him? We've had no law here since Pa got killed almost two years ago. Sam, what happened was bound to, with all the crazy shooting and fighting here. It's just too bad it had to be somebody so decent and lovely."

"Yes," he said curtly.

She tucked the covers around him better. "Now you're to get well quickly, Sam. You have a son to take care of and a ranch to run. Folks been spelling one another to keep things going for you and, from what I hear, you've got what'll probably be the best ranch in many a mile. So you're not going to lie there and feel sorry for yourself, because Amanda wouldn't like that."

"Reckon I'll be out of here in two or three days," Sam said. "I don't aim to be a bother to anybody."

She was on her feet quickly and angrily. "There's no need

to feel that way, either. You'd have done the same for me — for anyone. Nobody wants your thanks."

She flounced out and it was the first time Sam had ever seen her angry. It amused him.

THREE

IN four days he could hobble sufficiently to move about the house but being on his feet didn't make him feel any better. He was grateful for a pair of crutches Doc brought over. With their help he stood beside Louise and wiped the dishes as he used to do for Amanda. That, and everything Louise did, brought Amanda back. He had to get out of here and grow used to the idea of having no woman around. It would only be harder to adjust with each day that passed.

He did enjoy the evenings when he sat on the porch in the old rocker Louise's father had liked so much. He knew folks were going out of their way to stop by and talk to him. He did miss Jase, however, and late one afternoon he asked Louise about him.

"I've been afraid you'd ask," she said, with more of that candor which was far kinder than any evasion would have been. "I can't rightly tell you about him, Sam, but Doc is coming over pretty soon. I guess he knows better than me about — well, the way Jase feels."

"He's not sick?"

"No. No, not sick at all. He's working hard at the ranch. He says he has to, because you need a lot of help. Jase, will be all right, Sam, but let Doc tell about it."

Doc Evans was a small man of slight build and he looked wispy enough to be blown away in a strong breeze but in reality he was tougher than cactus. Sam always maintained a man who could smoke the ink-black cheroots Doc consumed in startling numbers, could take on a starving grizzly single-handed.

"It's mostly in Jason's mind," Doc said. "I'm just a frontier sawbones, Sam, and I'm not up on these things, but I've seen 'em before. The boy went through a great deal that af-

ternoon. You didn't notice—couldn't have, of course. It happened this way! Amanda died instantly. She never even knew what hit her, Sam, if that's any consolation. But dying instantaneous that way, the muscles in her hand contracted. The death-grip. I suppose the last thing she thought of was protecting Jase, so she held him tight."

He glanced at Louise, in response to the soft sounds coming from her. "What in tarnation you sniffing about, Louise?"

"I can't help it," she said, "if I'm the sentimental type. I loved Amanda."

"Get on with it, Doc," Sam said harshly.

"Well, Jason tried to pull away from her, but he couldn't. He saw you gunned and then slugged, and all the while he was trying to get free, but—well, he didn't until I got there. It was a bad experience for a boy. He knew his ma was dead, he was pretty sure his pa was dead, too, and he'd seen it all, but still he couldn't do anything because his dead mother wouldn't let go. He wanted to do whatever he could to help. To do the right thing. That's all."

"Doc, you been beating the bush until there's nothing left of it. Are you trying to tell me Jase lost his mind? Something like that?"

Louise pressed her hand against his arm quickly. "Oh, no, Sam. No, not like that."

"Well, what then?" Sam demanded.

"Just this, Sam. I was bringing Jase back to town to see you," Doc explained. "He got as white as paper when we started, and about the time he was able to see the outbuildings of town he turned green. He got sick to his stomach and he started to shake. I couldn't bring him out of it until I turned back. What I'm saying, Sam, is that Jase can't come to see you here. He can't stand being in this town."

"Sometimes I feel the same way," Sam said in a low voice.

"Oh, Sam," Louise said quickly, "don't say that. It's a fine town, once it settles down. Jase will get over this."

"Sure he will," Sam agreed, "but if a woman can't go buy a dress without getting killed, and her son can't go back into town because he's scared of it, then it's sure time something was done." -

"What're you getting at?" Doc asked.

"Nobody gives a damn," Sam said harshly. "Amanda got killed, Jase got scared out of his wits and nobody gives a damn. They're all sorry, but what's being sorry when what's

done can't be undone? I mean, a thing like this shouldn't happen again. What the town needs is some strong leadership."

"Like what?" Louise said eagerly.

"I don't know. We've got no law—no marshal. We got a man we call Judge and I don't think he can read a reward poster. Hank Forbes thinks that he's the mayor, just because he's got the biggest store in town. Well, he ain't mayor—because nobody elected him, and he'd be too doggone weak if he was elected."

"What I've been saying. All along I been saying just that," Louise said.

"What you got in the way of ideas, Sam?" Doc wanted to know.

"Nothing, and I'll tell you why. I don't live in town and it's none of my business, when you come right down to it."

Louise gave a snort of anger. "That's a fine way for you to talk—after Amanda was killed because the town is lawless. You listen to me, Sam Bishop. What'll happen to your ranch if everybody leaves town? There's not another town for fifty miles in any direction. If it dries up and blows away, so will your ranch."

Doc clasped his hands and looked solemn. "Sam, I'm beginning to think Louise wants you to be marshal, or maybe mayor."

Sam stared straight out across the street. From Louise's porch he could look down Main Street, see the spot where Amanda had dropped.

"For this town," Sam said, "I wouldn't be anything. If I didn't have so much tied up in my ranch, it'd be me who'd go away. For all I care, there can be ten fights a night and six killings. It would serve the town right."

"I think," Louise said spiritedly, "you'd better ride out to your place tomorrow. I'll see there's a buggy waiting and somebody to drive it. And if you try to thank me for what I did, I'll surely hit you with something, Sam Bishop, because I don't want your thanks or gratitude. All I want for you to do is get out of here and go live on your ranch and stay away from this town. Nobody asked you to like it here."

"She's kinda hot around the edges," Doc commented cheerfully.

"I got a right to be," Louise said. "My father thought enough of this damned town to get himself killed trying to protect it. You're not the only one who lost someone you

love, Sam Bishop. But I never felt sorry for myself. I never wanted to leave and I'm not going to now. That's all I got to say, gentlemen, and I'll thank you not to bother me."

She jumped up and flounced into the house, slamming the door hard. Doc chuckled. "Gal's sure mad. What she says makes sense, though."

"Maybe, but I want no part of it, Doc. I got me a ranch to run and a son to bring up. That'll keep me busy as all get-out. But I'm not forgetting Amanda."

"I know," Doc said in his kindly way. "It'll be hard at first, but you do have a son and lots of friends. That helps."

"And work to do," Sam said. "That'll help most of all."

After Doc left, Sam sat on the porch until the mosquitoes drove him inside. He avoided Louise like the plague, and got undressed and into bed and hoped he'd waken at sunrise so he could get out of there.

He tried to go to sleep quickly, to keep from thinking, but it was hard for a man used to physical labor that tired him beyond measure. He'd been idle too long. When memories of Amanda came back, he deliberately summoned them in all their bloody mountings and he let his pent-up rage soar to all manner of heights, and then it was over and he knew he could sleep. He pushed his face deep into the pillow, but he was conscious of the shaft of light from the kitchen when Louise opened the door.

"And I think you're not only ungrateful," she said in a voice choked with the emotion of spent tears and a good, solid anger that had built up since, "I think you're stupid, and I'm sure you're a coward, and I hope your ranch b-burns down—or something just as bad."

She slammed the door again.

He was beginning to believe she was a great door-slammer. He turned over on his back and looked up at the ceiling. She was trying to make him do something he didn't want to do.

"Damn you," he said softly. "Damn you again . . . and again . . ."

He wasn't sure whether he meant Louise or the town.

FOUR

THE next day he was still angry and he formally thanked Louise for her hospitality and tender care, and then he hobbled out to the buggy he'd rented from the livery. He was driving himself back. That was the way he wanted it.

She came out on the porch and watched him stow his crutches in the buggy and clumsily haul himself up onto the seat. He gave a cut of the whip at the flanks of the horse and went off in a cloud of dust. Louise thought he didn't have to whip the horse. She also thought that wasn't like him, and the firm lines around her mouth softened somewhat because she thought she knew the difference between real anger and the kind Sam was showing. She went back into the house, feeling rather good about it.

Sam stopped off at the little cemetery on the bluff. It was fenced in with a low, neat wooden fence provided with a gate. He went in and stood beside the grave where the earth was dry and dusty on top of the mound. He stood there and talked to Amanda, not feeling sheepish about it.

"We didn't quite make it, honey," he said. "Your part is done, but I'll keep on until I've got what both of us wanted. You worked for it, did more than your share, and I guess maybe you died because of it. Shucks, honey, if I hadn't met you, you'd likely married some man better than me, back in St. Louis, and nobody would have killed you in some drunken street fight. Well, we got us a son. What we worked so hard to share, will have to be his now. That's how it's going to be. I'm sorry it turned out this way, but being sorry won't bring you back. I'm not going to be all-fired mad about it either because you know what I'm like when my temper boils. You cooled it down and I like myself better that way. So I'll just keep working and make for us what we wanted. I figure you're here, part of you is Jason, and nothing's going to be changed so far as our plans go." He turned away abruptly. "Everything else changed," he murmured. He stepped over the fence rather than open the gate.

He paused at the side of the buggy to look down over the edge of the road and see the greenness stretching as far as the eye could see. Louise was right. Amanda would like it up here—and Louise's pa would have company. Sam had always liked him.

He hauled up before the ranch house and Jason came out. His hair was tousled and he looked as if he were slightly out of breath from hurrying to be ready when Sam arrived. But Jason approached him slowly and seriously, much like an older person, and he put out his hand to greet his father.

"Hello, Jase," Sam said, and shook hands.

"I'm glad you're back, Pa."

"So am I."

"You aiming to use the crutches?"

"Well, I guess not. I'll try to limp along without 'em. Can't go around depending on wooden pegs all my life now, can I?"

~~"Well, I guess not."~~

"How are things here?" Looking around the place, things seemed ship-shape.

"Fine, Pa. I'll put the horse up. There's grub in the house. Everybody's been dropping in to help. We got lots of friends."

Sam didn't reply. He was looking at the house now, that medium blueness of it, that Amanda had wanted, now looked less bright. But it was far more than just four rooms surrounded by painted blue walls.

This was the house that together they'd planned and built. The folks from town had all come out for a shivaree the night Sam and Amanda arrived. It had been one big, bang-up affair and everybody had told Sam he was sure one lucky coyote to have picked someone as downright pretty as Amanda. The party had run on right through the night and had been something to remember . . .

Amanda had brought Jason into this life in the big back room. She'd known every inch of the place and had loved it. Sam knew he'd see a thousand of her individual touches and they'd all bring her part way back. He wondered if he could stand it.

One thing would help—hard work, all aimed at making this the ranch she'd wanted it to be. He half-wished Jason was at his side to steady him and then he called himself a fool for needing his son's consolation. Especially that of a boy who probably needed it far more than he.

So Sam walked up to the house, limping quite badly, but not aware of the pain in his leg because that in his heart was so much greater. He pulled open the screen door and stepped into the kitchen.

There was a peg just inside the door where she used to hang her apron. He avoided looking in that direction. The kitchen was spotless. He suspected that Louise had ridden out here some of those times when she'd gone off for hours and never offered an explanation of where she'd been. The coffeepot was at the back of the stove, signaling by its aroma that there was hot coffee waiting for him. He went into the long pantry for a cup, carried it out and then turned back for a saucer—the latter because Amanda always insisted he use a saucer, even though he'd never seen the necessity for one.

He poured the coffee. Jase had made it, of course, but he knew how—sometimes. This time the coffee was strong and good. Sam sighed and turned around. Somehow, he didn't want to see that apron hanging there.

It wasn't. The peg was now occupied by a gun belt with his silver-handled sixgun in the holster. The leather was slicked up, the silver polished and shining. Sam drank coffee as he walked up to the wall to the gun. He studied it without touching the weapon. He knew it was loaded and ready, all oiled up as slick as the holster.

"Jase!" he called, his voice loud and angry.

Jason came running in, but got the crutches he was carrying from the wagon mixed up with the screen door, so he had a little trouble getting in. He stood the crutches up in a corner and then he went over beside Sam.

"You do that?" Sam asked, aiming the coffee cup at the gun.

"I figured maybe you'd like it," Jase said hopefully.

"Guns are not for kids. I had that gun just about buried and I want it to stay that way."

"Yes, sir," Jase said stiffly.

Sam put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "We'd better have a talk, Jase. Lots to talk about."

"Sure, Pa," Jason said. "Soon's I get me a cup of coffee."

Sam frowned. "You drinking coffee?"

"Uh-huh. Don't see any reason why not." Jason went over and expertly poured a cup. He did add four well-rounded spoons of sugar and a lot of heavy, yellow cream to it, so Sam thought it would do him more good than harm.

"Now about this gun," Sam said. "Why'd you stow it up and hang it there?"

"You'll gun down the man who killed Ma, won't you?" Jason asked casually.

"No," Sam said, "I won't."

"He's got it coming."

"I'm not sure. He didn't mean to kill her. I—I've known him a long time. He's a decent, hard-working ranch hand, but he should never drink."

"You'll gun him," Jason said confidently. "Next time you see him, you'll kill him. And he'll be back. Hodge never did stay away long."

Sam set down the cup and Jason promptly filled it, putting the pot on the wooden table now so it would remain handy—a little gesture Amanda would never have let him get away with.

"Thank you," Sam said. "Now understand this, Jase. I'm no killer. I don't want to gun anybody, and that includes even Hodge."

Jason wagged his head. "You sure changed, Pa. Oh, heck, I heard all about how you used to ride with outlaws and then sometimes you rode posse. You were real handy with a gun, I heard. I guess you were about the best there was in Arizona."

"That was back in Arizona, before I met your mother and settled down. A long time ago. A man hangs up his gun, it stays hung up, Jase."

"Sure, Pa," Jason said. "But I'll keep the gun looking slick and new-like. Because when I grow up a little more I'll gun Hodge myself, if you're afraid to."

Sam hit the table so hard the coffee slopped over into the saucer. "I'm not afraid of Hodge or any man, Jase. But I'm through with killing."

"Reckon you are," Jason said calmly.

"You're telling me right to my face I'm a coward. H'r m. Well, speaking of cowards, what about you, Jase? Doc tells me you're scared to ride into town. How about that?"

Jason's eyes suddenly grew bright with tears. He jumped up and ran into his room before Sam could see him cry. Sam washed the cups and rinsed out the pot, giving the boy time before he went into the room and sat down on the bed.

He spoke gently and without rancor. "I guess your ma sort of arranged our lives so nothing like this would happen while

she was round. Which means it won't now, not even with her gone. We got a lot of thinking to do and a lot of talking out to do, but we'll do it gradually. We'll look the thing right in the eye and make up our minds. That suit you, Jase?"

Jason sat up. "Sure, Pa. I guess Ma wouldn't want you to gun down Hodge even for what he did. She wouldn't want you to do it anyway, being what you used to be. A fast gun who hired out for money."

"That's enough," Sam said sharply.

"Yes, sir."

"That's better. Now we'll get to work. There's fence to mend and wire to be strung. I figure we'd better build us a real smart corral out back of the barn—with a high fence around. We'll need more horses, and this fall's a good time to round up a few and break 'em. We got so much work ahead of us, Jase, we won't have time to think."

There were days of this intense work that sent both of them to bed right after sundown. Sometimes Jase had trouble keeping awake while he wiped the dishes, but he insisted on doing that so Sam let him.

Nights were hours of steady torture to Sam. The bed was too big, and too cold, and much too empty. He'd drop off to sleep and wake up to reach for Amanda and then, in one instant, he'd know she wasn't there and he'd really wake up and ~~say something~~.

The hard work finally cured him. There came a night when he didn't wake up and then there were others, until finally the period of adjustment was over and the ache was dulled.

The gun hung there to challenge him. He hadn't asked Jason to put it away and he didn't do so himself. It was his defiance of what Jason expected him to do.

Two weeks went by before he knew he couldn't avoid going into town. They were out of food and supplies, and there was a drastic need for new wire. He hitched up the buckboard and called Jason to get dressed.

Jason didn't move. "Pa, I don't want to go with you."

He led the boy over to the back porch steps and sat down beside him. "I'm sorry I called you a coward back there, when I first came home. You had a bad time, but it's passed by now. There'll be a strain at first, but it'll be over."

"If you ask me, I'll go," Jason said. "I don't want to, but I will."

"Get dressed," Sam said. "Sooner or later, you have to go in. Might as well be now."

Jason was unusually quiet during the ride toward town. It was hot and the dust kicked up by the horse, settled on their skin, and caked. Sam kept wiping it off him with a big, red handkerchief, but Jason didn't seem to notice the discomfort. As they neared town, Sam kept a sharp watch on the boy. He was growing more and more concerned about what might happen. Of course, right after he'd seen his mother shot, he'd be expected to have a reaction, but enough time had now elapsed so he should be cured of the horror of that memory.

Suddenly, a moment after the first of the outbuildings came into view, Jason lurched to the side of the buckboard and vomited. Sam brought the wagon to a quick stop.

"Are you sick?" he asked, in a worried voice.

"I—don't know, Pa. I guess maybe—I ate too much of them dried apples, I guess. That's what I did." And he threw up again two minutes after the wagon was in motion.

Sam said, "We're going to stop off and let Doc have a look at you, Jase. Won't hurt any. We'll lay in a good supply of that hard candy you like, too. Might be worse for your teeth than dried apples, but not as bad for your stomach."

Jason didn't reply. Sam saw that he held onto the buckboard seat with both hands and his feet were planted rigidly on the floor. They passed the first of the houses and turned onto the road that eventually became Main Street. That was when Jason began to shake.

He trembled from head to foot in an uncontrollable spasm. His eyes were rolled back and he bared his teeth like an animal while they chattered as if they'd break. His face was perfectly white and before long, there were flecks of saliva around his mouth.

Sam edged the horse to the side of the road and turned the wagon around. Gradually, as the distance from town increased, Jason began to lose some of his rigidity. His eyes focused again, he stopped shaking and only trembled. All the symptoms were now in distinct reverse. Finally they were gone, and Sam pulled up the horse where there was sweet grass at the edge of the road and let him munch.

"I'm sorry, Jase," he said. "I didn't think it was as bad as that for you."

"I -just can't do it, Pa. I get so scared. I don't know why I feel that way."

"Don't worry about it," Sam said. "Things like that go away. I'll do everything I can to make it go fast."

"One thing might work, Pa."

He knew what Jason was going to say, but he had to make him say it. "What's that, Jase?"

"Gun down Hodge."

Sam picked up the reins and got the horse started, but he turned off the road and went on up into the hills to the small graveyard where two people were buried.

He stepped down off the wagon, lifted Jason down as if he were still a small boy. They walked to the gate and he let Jason go in first. Someone had cut sod and carefully covered the mound with it so everything was now green and lush, and there were no ugly scars upon the ground. He suspected Louise had done that.

"Tell her what you just told me, Jase," Sam said, pointing to the grave. "You go ahead. Just tell Ma I got to gun Hodge."

Jason bit his lip and shook his head. "Guess I can't, Pa. Guess I know what you mean."

"All right," Sam said. "You just stand there a bit and think about it and I'll be on the wagon when you're ready."

Jason stood at the head of the grave for about five minutes. Then he walked briskly to the gate, vaulted it, climbed onto the wagon and settled down.

"I'll drop you at the ranch," Sam said. "Then I'm going into town alone. I won't ask you to go with me again until you feel you can."

"I feel awful," Jason said, "but I can't help it."

"It's no shame to feel that way. I'm not ashamed of you, I'm not even sorry for you, because you'll work this out in good time. Meanwhile we have to eat and fence in cattle."

"I'll be fine, Pa," Jason said. "Being alone don't bother me none."

At the ranch Jason hopped down off the wagon and stood looking up at Sam. "Thanks, Pa, for not getting mad. And for taking me to see Ma."

He stood there watching until Sam was almost out of sight and when Sam twisted around to look back, Jason waved both arms wildly. Sam waved back, using his hat to make

sure Jason saw. Then he rode on into town at a good clip and knew he had to do something about the town. He wasn't sure what there was to be done or how to go about it, but he intended to talk to anybody who would listen.

And he thought he might stop off at Louise's and tell her how much he liked the grave and apologize for the way he'd acted when he left her place . . .

FIVE

AT first, the town made him sick.

Nothing had changed, all was quite as usual. The noise in the saloons as loud, the men along the street as boisterous and there was just as much mud and the sidewalks needed repairs as badly as ever. The trouble with this town was that everybody wanted to make money here, but nobody had the slightest desire to spend any of it to improve the place where they lived or even themselves.

Then he realized there was really no reason why anything should have changed. Because a woman died accidentally during a gunfight was no reason for the town itself to change. Others had been killed before and more peaceful folk would die until somebody made the people of Winter Gap face up to their responsibilities.

He glanced at Louise's bakery and he could see her inside, busily waiting on some women. She didn't look up long enough to notice him, so he rode on. Finally, at the end of the street he tied the horse to a hitchrack, then went about making his purchases. When the rig was loaded, he drove it slowly down the street, still trying to make up his mind what to do.

Something had to be done, that was sure. Kids like Jason deserved better than to be ridden by fear of the town the rest of their lives. Women like Amanda certainly were not meant to be killed during somebody else's fight. His rig wheeled past the spot where Amanda had died, rode over the area where he'd been gunned down. Perhaps it was the association with these particular spots that did it—the mental

pain when he thought back on Amanda lying there, dead in an instant. Of Jason screaming in terror, of his own agony.

He drove straight to the livery stable and turned the horse and rig over to Cal Pelham, who seemed nervous that Sam might shoot up the town before dark. Sam walked out of the stable and on down the street.

He turned into the biggest store where Hank Forbes did business behind a long counter and a grilled window before the cash drawer. Hank was forty-five, pudgy, self-important and successful. As purveyor to almost everyone in and about Winter Gap, he felt that he all but ran the town. That was why Sam sought him out first.

Hank came from behind the counter and shook hands warmly. "Sam, it's good to see you again. And looking so well. Damned evil thing—the whole affair. Evil and unnecessary."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Sam said. "It's the reason why I dropped in."

Hank signaled a gangling youth, whom Sam didn't know, to take over and he led Sam into a back room that served as an office. It was equipped with a rolltop desk, freighted in at considerable expense, as Hank told everyone. There were comfortable chairs and enough bottled cheer to make life interesting for Hank's visitors.

He poured two generous drinks, settled down behind the desk and saluted Sam with his glass. "Now," he said, "what's on your mind, Sam? I can see something is."

"Hank—what happened to Amanda, and to me, set me thinking this town needs a lawman again."

Hank sat bolt upright in his chair. "Sam, do you remember what happened to Myron Amister? Marshal for less than a year, and then shot down."

"Myron was getting on and he was too goldarn nice to be a lawman. But he died like one."

"Guess we all know that. You're wrong about us needing another marshal, though. Sure—after what happened, you'd say we needed one real bad. But on the whole, this town's law-abiding enough for most."

"And you wouldn't want to rile any of your customers who might stay in town for a few too many drinks and a little horseplay."

"Can't see no reason to drive money away, Sam. Besides, a marshal has to be paid and there was always a ruckus when

it came time to put Myron's wages down in the books. We got no taxes here, Sam. Not a red penny do we pay, and that's something to be said for Winter Gap."

"It draws folks here," Sam admitted. "But after a few more of 'em get shot up, lots are going to move away."

"Nobody's shooting anybody up, Sam. Amanda got caught in the middle of a fool, drunken fight. It was just as much an accident as if she got run down by a runaway freight wagon."

Sam got to his feet and put down his untasted drink. "This town needs law," he said. "The decent folks know it and they'd vote for it if you gave them a chance to vote. But you'll see to it they never do, because it would take away money from your till, Hank. You don't care what happens out there on the street. You and every other man in town who stands to make a dollar from the hell-raising ranch hands and drifters who come in with their full pokes."

"Oh, sit down and finish your drink," Hank said with a wave of his hand. "Nobody's arguing the need of law, but it just won't work in Winter Gap at this time. Ten, fifteen years from now, maybe."

"Why won't it work now? You tell me that, Hank."

"Because folks don't want law here."

"Other towns have marshals."

"Other towns ain't Winter Gap. Other towns ain't set so far-off—away from civilized life. This is raw country here. To hold it we have to attract folks and they won't come if there are taxes to pay and strutting lawmen to give them orders. Some gunslinger who'd do more damage than good."

"I don't agree with you, Hank. I'm going to talk to other people about it."

"You be sure to do that. I'd like to know how folks feel too—even if I already know. You ask, Sam, but ask like a man who ain't suffered as you have. Get the chip off your shoulder and the hate out of your heart. Then ask."

He asked—half a dozen people. All agreed the law would help, but not right now. A year . . . two years . . .

He dropped in on Judge Frank Glover. The old man smelled of cheap whiskey, and he listened to Sam with an amused smile.

"You're talking right, Sam," he said. "We need law here. Yes, sir, we need it more'n anything else in this world. I ain't made a dollar easy since Marshal Amister got himself shot right through that badge he was wearing—and, incidentally,

that star point went into his heart. Amister used to bring prisoners before me and I could fine 'em and add costs, which was my legal fee. Now you just go ahead and get us a new marshal and I'll give you all the co-operation there is."

Sam sighed deeply. "Judge, you're an old, whiskey-soaked fraud. Nobody elected you judge any more than they elected Hank Forbes mayor, but both of you act as if you were appointed by the governor. I'll tell you this, Frank—if law does come to Winter Gap, there'll be a new judge, too. A real one."

Frank Glover frowned. "Lawman wouldn't have helped you none. Amanda knew there was trouble and she should've guessed there might be shooting. She should've gotten outa the way, Sam. Even so—a lawman couldn't have done no good. But he sure might've seen to it that Hodge Bundy got strung up."

"Even if it was accidental, as you claim it was, and probably Amanda's fault for not getting out of the way?"

"There was a responsibility on Hank too—should've looked where he was shooting. Fact is, Sam, it was more up to you to take care of Hodge. Now if you'd been wearing a gun . . ."

"I parted company with guns some time back. I'm a rancher and I got no use for them."

"You did have that day. Hodge near killed you, too. Well, Sam, I can't say this has been a friendly visit, but a man's got the right to sound off any way he likes."

Sam agreed and went on out of the grubby room. Sam felt lonely and frustrated. He had need of someone who'd agree with him wholeheartedly and maybe have some advice to offer. Suddenly he discovered that he was crossing the street and aimed straight at Louise's bakery.

The warm, friendly odor of oven-hot pies and bread came out to greet him before he reached the door. Louise was flour-smeared and hard at work getting ready for the next day. But she gave Sam the warm greeting he wanted and she quickly laid out cups and plates for coffee and pie. He ate slowly and with vast satisfaction.

"How's Jason?" she asked.

He shook his head, some of the heartache returning. "Tong as he stays on the ranch, he's fine. Get him within eye-distance of town and he gets sick. The boy ain't play-acting, I o' s'c. He really gets sick."

"I'll go out to see him as soon as I can, Sam." She clenched her small fist. "Oh, why doesn't somebody do something about this town?"

"That's what I been asking folks all afternoon," he said. "I was sort of laying the groundwork for a new marshal. We need one bad, Louise."

"More than we need anything else," she agreed. "But nobody realizes it. I've tried to make them understand. The way it is now, Pa died for nothing at all. No good came of his sacrifice. It's like nobody cares."

"They don't. Believe me, I found that out today. Lawmen would put a cramp in the style of the free-and-easy spending boys. Taxes would scare away more folks who are looking for a place to settle and all the important people in Winter Gap might lose a dollar or two. They're so selfish, they can't see beyond the figures in their ledger books."

"Sam," she said impulsively, "make them understand."

"I can't. There's no way—and besides, I guess I don't care any more. Winter Gap killed Amanda and made my son scared to go within sight of the town. I've come to hate the place and I'd leave if I could."

"But you can't."

"I've gone too far with the ranch."

"Then you have to make others understand we need law here," she said earnestly. "Because you have to stay and a lot of other folks have to stay. There must be some sort of protection, someone who can handle trouble."

"For sixty dollars a month? And be a target for any drunken gun-toting lunatic who happens to feel like taking a shot at a marshal?"

"Yes—exactly. For sixty dollars a month, and the privilege of being shot at."

He wagged his head and grinned. "You're sure pretty when you get riled like this, but you just don't have any sense, Louise. Neither did I."

"You tell me why we've no sense, Sam Bishop. You just go ahead and convince me I'm a fool."

"I didn't say you're a fool, Louise. But you and me—we lost people we love to killers without brains or feeling. You lost your pa, I lost Amanda. We're rightfully angry. If your pa was alive and my Amanda was . . ." He drew a sharp breath and winced. "Well—would we be like the other folks? Maybe we'd say the law will come soon enough. I let the town

grow first. Towns grow faster when they're not held down."

Louise bounced out of her chair and left the room. He heard a drawer open and slam shut and then she returned and slapped a polished brass star on the table. One of its points had been shot off, the jagged edge remaining.

"You hold Pa's badge in your hand and say that," she challenged. "Go ahead—you hear me, Sam? The bullet tore part of the badge off and it was buried with Pa along with the bullet. He wore the badge proudly and he died because he thought it was worth defending. Far as you and this danged town are concerned, he might as well have fallen down drunk and broken his neck. Nobody cares . . . not one living soul cared, though Amanda did. We used to talk about it—the shame of it. Now she's dead and you loved her, and yet you say there's nothing to be done."

"Nothing I can do," he said hastily.

"Somebody has to. You've got a reason—a very big one. So have I, but I'm a woman and I can't fight rowdy drunks or stand up to guns. But if I were a man . . . Oh, I'd show all the Judge Glovers and the merchant princes, like that idiot Hank Forbes. I'd show them what law could do for this town. I'd show them if I had to fill up Boot Hill doing it, and if you think I'm bloodthirsty, well I am. For the blood of men who **think killing is funny.**"

Sam wouldn't go along with it. "Louise, nobody thinks killing is funny. We're not that bad."

"Oh, don't they? Men in the saloons laugh at Hodge Bundy because he was supposed to be a good shot and fast with a gun, and the best he could do was gun down a woman instead of the man he wanted to shoot. They think it's funny. **They laugh!**"

Sam's face set in grim lines. He was glad he never had heard them, but he still believed there was nothing he could do. He was also tired of arguing about the matter. He stood up abruptly.

"Thank you for the coffee and the pie," he said. "I'm sorry all we did was argue our heads off. Maybe you're right about the whole thing but I still can't see what anybody can do unless **the town helps.**"

She smiled. "I'm sorry, too, Sam. We see so little of one another that we shouldn't argue like this. I'll make up a bag of sugarbuns for Jase. And I'll ride out as soon as I can."

"You know how much you're welcome, any time. Maybe

you can do something for Jase. I can't, but a woman has a knack for that sort of thing."

Louise carefully wrapped enough sweets to give Jason nightmares. "I refuse to argue any more, Sam. I'll do what I can. Now get along with you—I got dough to set out and sugar icing to make . . ."

He shook hands politely with her and the warm touch of her reminded him of Amanda. Then he walked out of the shop and on down the street. In a short time the men would ride in from the ranches and the drifters would get out of bed and the town would roar again.

Now there were children and women along the sidewalk, but they'd soon retire to the safety of their homes. The men-folk conveniently forgot that afternoon of sudden death, but the women had not and the kids were not permitted to. It was a shameful thing, exactly as Louise maintained.

Sam fetched his rig from the livery stable and climbed onto the seat. He placed the bag of sweets beside him, collected some of the things he'd bought after his first round of stores and headed back to his ranch, looking forward to the peace of it—the quiet and the chance for hard, sweating work that would make him forget that much faster. A man could work the hate out of his heart and mute some of the screaming memories. But Jase . . . a boy his age shouldn't have to live with the sort of memory scar he carried . . .

SIX

FOR a week he and Jase worked long hours and hard. From sunrise, when some of the stock had to be watered, through days of setting posts, chousing steers out of heavy brush where they might be injured, currying horses, breaking a couple of tough ones. Each hour was busy and a blessing. There were times when he wondered if Jase might not be overcoming some of those memories, but Sam was in no hurry to test this.

"Wonder why Louise don't come out like she promised?" Jase asked one day. They were working down a woodpile and Jase rested his back, aching from lugging too many logs.

Sam slashed the razor edge of the ax into the stump. "You're thinking of the sweet stuff she'd be bringing," he said. "Tell you what—"

"Pa—don't ask me. Please don't ask me," Jase broke in fearfully.

"I wasn't fixing to ask you anything, Jase. You thought I was going to say we'd ride to town. I meant I would—I said nothing about you coming along."

"I reckon you're kinda mad at me for getting so sick and scared." Jase sat down on a log and used his blunt shoe-tips to fiddle with a loose stone. "But I sure ain't proud of it, Pa. When I get ready . . . when I think I can do it . . . then we'll ride in."

"Sure, Jase. But don't worry about it, son. You're real okay. And I'm proud of you. Don't forget it."

Jase did not reply directly, but Sam could almost feel the tension relax in the boy . . .

Late in the afternoon, Sam was stripped to the waist in the back yard while he doused himself with icy water from the well. Jase came running from the front of the house.

"Rider coming, Pa. Like he's in a gosh-awful rush."

Sam hurried around the side of the house and saw the horse and rider burning the wind. The rider was Louise. Sam immediately sensed the urgency in the way she drove the horse.

He raced inside, slipped into a clean shirt and his town pants and boots. He tightened the belt around his slim middle and was outside in time to greet her, as if he were dressed this way all the time.

She slid from the saddle and ran to him. Jase, who was ready to welcome her with boyish enthusiasm and an eye for a bag of sweet buns, stepped aside.

She reached Sam and had to calm down before she could speak. Her usually laughing blue eyes were stormy in anger and touched with just a little fear.

"Trouble in town, Sam. Three men from the Double M rode in this morning. Seems they lost their jobs, got paid off and came in to celebrate. They got roaring drunk and things got out of hand. Now they're just about treeing the town. They say they'll shoot anybody who interferes with them. Nobody has."

"Saw it finally happened," Sam said.

"Sam, everybody's afraid of them. They're shooting out

windows. They've driven all the women off the streets. They take anything they want from the stores."

"Who's to stop them?" Sam asked mildly.

"I thought you would," she said promptly.

Sam shook his head. "Oh, no, Louise. Not me. I told them in town they needed a man who could handle a gun, but they said it would cost the town money. Let them find out how much it'll cost them when there's nobody to stand up to three ringy fools who know they're safe because nobody has the guts to face them."

She hesitated a moment. "Sam—are you afraid?"

"Why'd you ask that?" His voice was sharp, his question quick.

"Because—because of what happened. With Amanda—and then you nearly died . . ."

"I'm not afraid."

"Sam, two of them came into my shop and helped themselves. They—tried to grab me. One of them did kiss me but they were just a little too drunk and I got away from them. When they sober up a bit, they'll come back. They said so. I don't want them to touch me."

"Stay here," Sam said. "It'll all blow over and you'll be safe with us."

"I can't do that. I have a business. There's baking to do, people want to buy what I make. I will not allow anybody to drive me out of my own place."

"Louise," Sam said, "what do you want me to do? Stand up to three crazy galoots who'll be sorry for what they did day after tomorrow? Suppose they don't like me when I tell them to cut all that dang fool stuff. Suppose they come at me with a gun—or three guns. Shall I kill them?"

"I don't know, Sam." Louise struck her booted leg with the riding crop. "I'm not a man. I can't say what's to be done, but something has to be."

"But why me? Why call on me?"

"Because you have a reputation that goes into your past. You're good with a gun—you've used a gun, you know how it's done."

Sam shook his head. "I've been finished with all that a long time and I have no wish to go back to it. You came to the wrong man, Louise."

She nodded curtly. "So I see."

"But you're more than welcome to stay here until the ruckus dies down."

"We'd be mighty glad to have you," Jason added.

"Thank you—but I live in town, and my place is there. I'll do the best I can. Pa's gun is still in the house and I've fired it. I'll use it if I have to."

She walked back to her horse. Sam sprang after her, seized her arm. "Now you listen to me, Louise Amister. What you're intending to do is plain foolishness."

"It's necessary. Nothing as necessary as this is foolish, Sam. I'm just sorry I bothered you . . ."

Sam glanced at Jase. "Go saddle the black. Snap into it, Jase."

"You riding?" Jase asked hopefully.

"I'll see if I can quiet the idiots," Sam said.

"Sam, don't do this unless you want to . . ."

"I don't want to," he said flatly. "I'm a man who hung onto the tail of trouble a long time before I could shake loose. But you're my friend and Jason's, and nobody's going to threaten you. I'll be back before long."

"I'll ride with you," Louise said.

"You'll stay here or I don't go," he said sharply.

Jase led the black out of the barn and then he raced for the house. In a moment, he returned, holding the heavy gun belt with both hands.

"You put that back," Sam said angrily and loudly. "If I catch you handling the gun again, I'll whop you good. You hear me, boy?"

Jase nodded miserably and lowered the hopefully proffered gun.

Louise hesitated just a moment. "Sam, they're crazy. They won't care if you're unarmed . . ."

"Guns make trouble every time," Sam said. "I'll handle 'em. Stay here with Jase."

Jase stood close beside her and when she reached for his hand, he was glad to give it to her and they stood there watching Sam mount with his fluid smoothness and then guide the sleek animal onto the wagon road that led to town. Once there, he touched flanks with spurs and the powerful horse took off at full speed.

Louise smiled down at Jason. "You'd better do as your pa says, Jase. About the gun, I mean."

"Yes," the boy agreed. "Reckon I better. He sure bates guns—for a man who lived by 'em."

"Who told you that, Jason?"

"I reckon most everybody, and I got big ears. I used to hear Ma telling him the old days were no good."

"They weren't, Jason."

"They sure couldn't have been much worse than right now."

"It was different then. Everything out here wasn't civilized. And don't you go saying that Winter Gap isn't civilized, because it is. There are no Indians to fight any more, there are no more range wars, and people are settling down, Jason. That's what's going to make the West grow big and prosperous."

Jason hefted the gun belt. "I reckon so, but if Pa wore this, he'd sure scare the daylights out of them range bums."

"Let's go inside," Louise said. "Maybe I can clean up a little and even bake something. If you have supplies."

"That'd be fine," Jason said, with less than usual interest. He was watching the dust cloud settle on the wagon road long after his father had disappeared.

Louise moved about the four-room house freely. It was surprisingly clean and well kept up for a man with one small son. There were, however, certain touches which were lacking. The curtains needed doing and there were some shirts of Sam's . . .

She checked the pantry and found it very well supplied, much of the staple goods left since Amanda died. She put dried apples on to soak, made a quick crust, enough for three pies. She made Jason step up the fire in the range and while the pies baked, she went to work on the curtains. She hung them in the sunlight, and then ironed Sam's shirts and the ones Jason brought out. The pies were finished and the curtains already dry enough for ironing. She didn't waste a moment.

Work kept her from worrying. Sam had gone into town unarmed, to quiet down three men who might refuse his suggestions in a violent way. She was sorry she'd urged him to go. She touched a moistened finger to the iron, heard it hiss and then set to removing the wrinkles in the curtains. Jason also kept on the move, chattering steadily as if he, too, didn't want to think about what his father faced . . .

Sam realized immediately just how serious was the situation in town. Late afternoon was usually a busy time, but there wasn't a soul on the streets and few horses were racked. He noticed that Hank Forbes's store had the curtain drawn on the door to indicate he was closed, and Hank never closed until there was no possibility of another customer.

Sam also saw some broken windows and outside one of the saloons lay a round card table, smashed into pieces and now only good for kindling.

The racket came from the Gold Eagle, the fanciest saloon in town. Sam rode slowly down the middle of the street until he reached the saloon. He dismounted, tied his horse and took a hitch in his pants, wishing he hadn't put on his best ones. He had an idea there was going to be trouble.

He climbed the four steps to the boardwalk in front of the saloon and that was the moment when the batwings flew open and one man came out.

He was arrogantly drunk and raging mad. He wore two guns, tied down, and it was apparent that the angry noises inside the place had been directed at him. As always, three wild men, drunk too long, were having a falling out.

Sam recognized him as Maxon Brown, and he knew at once, without seeing them, that Brown's companions would be Al Hadley and a particularly obnoxious—and dangerous—character named Packey Turkel. They usually took pride in the way they could take a town to pieces, but this time there'd been no one to stop them, so they'd just kept going.

"Outa my way," Maxon said harshly.

Sam didn't move. "So long, Maxon," he said, and swung suddenly and hard. Maxon crashed against the batwings, fell backward through them and they closed over him, flapping noisily. When they banged open again, Sam was on his way through, stepping over Maxon's unconscious form.

There were two harassed and scared bartenders—and two customers—Hadley and Turkel. Sam studied them a moment and wished he had worn his gun. Hadley moved up on Sam.

"This here's a private saloon," Hadley said. "We don't welcome strangers. That means you."

"Cut it out, Al," Sam said. "You had your fun. Now clear out."

Hadley made a mistake then. He drew his gun. If he'd kept his fists, Sam might have been in trouble because,

before he would have been able to subdue Al Hadley, Turkel could have moved in. A gun was different. A gun requires fast work, the stiffest kind of resistance.

Sam saw the gun coming up. He performed a half-swivel on the ball of his left foot. At the same time, his hand seized Al's arm. It was all one strong, fluid movement which caught Al unprepared. Sam applied pressure, lifted Al's gun arm, bent slightly and hurled Al over his shoulder. He heard bone snap. When he had executed this trick in the old days, he'd usually broken his opponent's arm.

Al shouted in pain, his gun skittering across the floor. He was banged down so hard he lost consciousness.

With the same continuous motion, Sam threw himself on the floor, rolled over twice like an acrobat, and came up with Al's gun in his fist. Turkel was drawing, but when he looked along the barrel of the gun slanted up at him, his face grew white under the tan and he backed away a step or two.

Then his expression changed abruptly, grew more confident. Sam had dealt with men like these so often before, he knew all the signs. He was on one knee, but that didn't keep him from making a smooth twist of his body.

Maxon Brown, whom Sam had walloped first, was drawing his weapon. Sam fired twice. Both slugs ripped into Maxon's body—high, where they'd stop him, but not kill him, if he got medical attention quickly enough.

Turkel was making his play. Sam's eyes grew icy cold. "Try it and I'll aim to kill," he said harshly.

Turkel hesitated and in that instant of indecision, he lost his nerve. He let the gun fall to the floor. Sam got to his feet and walked up to Turkel slowly. He raised the gun he held and slashed it across Turkel's face. These men understood force far better than anything else, and with a slight dressing of pain and bloodletting, they ceased to be dangerous. Turkel cried out and backed off fast.

Sam picked up his sixgun, backstepped to where Hadley was trying to orient himself, and used his foot to push Hadley back onto the floor. He moved on to Maxon and took his gun away.

"You." Sam pointed to one of the bartenders. "Go fetch Doc Evans."

The bartender scrambled to obey. After a while, Hank Forbes, the merchant, came bustling in, wearing a gun and an air of vast importance.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Oh, shut up," Sam said angrily. "You know what's been going on all day. I shot Maxon Brown, I busted Al Hadley's arm and I buffaloed Packey Turkel."

"Did you have to do all this damage?" Hank asked.

"I figured I'd rather damage them than get myself damaged, Hank."

"You're a violent man." Hank insisted on keeping up his attitude of righteousness.

"Where were you when all this began?" Sam asked. "How come your store is closed? Here we have three free-spenders, so I can't see why you closed up, Hank. Or was it because these three galoots were just taking without paying, and you didn't like the idea of standing up to them?"

"But all this." Forbes' arm made an imperious gesture around the room. "A man wounded, another with a broken arm and the one . . . bleeding around the face. . . ."

"The one wounded," Sam said patiently, "drew on me and was about to kill me. The one with the broken arm did the same. I took his gun away from him. But Maxon Brown wasn't close enough, so I shot him. Packey started to draw, changed his mind, thought he could get the best of me while my back was turned, and tried again. He didn't make it. I don't like men who want to shoot me in the back. I want them to know I don't like them, so I told them in a way they understood. And I'll do it again if they're in town ten more minutes."

"Now see here . . ." Hank began.

"And what's more, the man who interferes will get clouted as well. Ten minutes, Packey. If I were you, I'd start now."

Packey slid out of the saloon. Doc Evans arrived and took Maxon Brown and Al Hadley to his office, disarmed and creak.

Sam placed the guns on the bar. "If you give them back to these idiots and they use 'em, you'll get just what you deserve."

He walked out. On the street, now crowded with people, Sam walked unmolested and ungreeted. He saw Packey come riding out of the livery stable. Someone threw a stone at him and Packey applied his spurs to the horse.

Sam untied his black, swung into the saddle and rode out. He wasn't especially proud of what he'd done. He was happy enough that his old reactions to danger were serving him

well and he remembered how to handle tinhorns like those three men, but there was a vast dissatisfaction with the whole affair.

There should have been a lockup where the trio could have been held for trial, and then a suitable punishment meted out. There was a jail. It had been boarded up ever since Myron Amister was killed, like a silent tribute to the man who gave his life because of a town he believed in. But it wasn't a tribute. It was merely due to the fact that nobody had the slightest idea of what to do with a jail in a town that had no law . . .

Sam felt some better by the time he sighted his ranch. At least it was peaceful here—and if anybody tried to disrupt that peace, he'd fight. The gun would come down off its peg then—but not until then.

And yet, his eagerness to get home couldn't be entirely due to the peaceful qualities of the ranch and he knew, perhaps dimly and perhaps with considerable irritation, that there was a difference in the ranch because a woman was there waiting for him.

Because Louise Amister was there . . .

SEVEN

SO was a hot supper and a son, spruced up and clean as a whistle. There was fresh bread and pies and a cake for later. The coffee tasted like coffee and not either a half-brewed tea, as when Jase made it cautiously, or like burned leather, as when Sam made it far more generously.

The house had that spotless look only a woman can give it and the kitchen smells were mouth-watering.

"Eat first," Louise said, "and tell us what happened afterward."

But Jason couldn't wait that long. His prodding questions brought out the full story and Sam was glad to see his son's face light up in pride. Louise, too, seemed smugly satisfied with the way things turned out.

"Three of 'em," Jason enthused. "Three gunslingers and you took 'em, Pa."

"Not gunslingers," Sam corrected him. "Just three crazy cowhands who were too full of red-eye to give me much trouble."

"Just the same, three . . ."

"We'll stop talking about it right now," Sam said. He smiled at Louise. "You must have worked awful hard and fast. I never saw the place look so good since—Amanda . . ."

It came out without too much effort and the sting was gone. Even Jason noticed, and it was a good thing. Maybe in a short time Jase would be able to go into town.

"I'm going to ride to town with Louise," Sam told his son. "When I get back, I expect to find you in bed."

"Yes, sir," Jason said without enthusiasm.

"We lost time today and we've got to get caught up. And let the cake and pie alone. It'll do us for a week, if you keep your face out of it."

"Yes, sir," Jase said with even less enthusiasm and Sam grinned at him. "All right—have some, but not too much."

Louise insisted on washing the dishes before she left, and Sam dried. Jason hurried out to saddle her horse. He stood outside the door and watched them ride away, moving slowly because there was no vast hurry. Then Jason went back into the kitchen, examined the pies and the cake and speculated on how much he could consume and get away with.

The green, level country over which Sam and Louise rode was pleasantly scented with the bright green grass and there was a comforting quietness in the air. They rode for a mile or two in comparative silence, content to let the country and the land talk to them in its own language.

"When I think of leaving here, I almost get sick," Louise said.

"Leaving? Louise, you're not thinking of leaving?"

"There isn't much for me here, Sam. Not since Pa died. And I'm getting so that I hate the town and everybody in it. This thing—these three men—that will happen again. Next time, someone may be killed just as Amanda was. If Winter Gap doesn't have sense enough to grow up, then I don't care to stay."

He was riding very close to her. Their eyes locked and Sam's took on an amused glint. "But if I pinned on your pa's badge and started enforcing some law in Winter Gap, then the fools who have no sense would be good people again."

You don't fool me one bit, Louise. You got no mind to leave here."

"Well, I've thought about it," she said defensively.

"Maybe Packey and the others will spread the word," he said.

"They know we haven't any law, and if you come at them again and they kill you, they'll say it was self-defense and they'll get away with it. That is, if there's anybody to arrest them."

"If they come back, they'll behave or I'll give them more of what they just got."

"Maxon and Al . . . they're not too bad, but Turkel is evil. He's a bad one to cross. I think he'll be back, and it won't be so easy to beat him next time, Sam."

"Wearing a badge won't make it any easier," he said.

"But at least if you had to shoot him, it would be legal."

Sam laughed. "Now that's real bloodthirsty of you. I said once before, I'm done with that sort of thing, Louise. It takes too much out of a man and I have responsibilities now. I can't expect to win every gunfight, and when that last one comes—what happens to Jason and the ranch? What good will I do myself to face up to men who don't mind killing? Everyone in town asks the same question about anything that happens. What good will it do me before I take any part? It's like a chant. I've heard it a hundred times, and nobody's life was at stake. Well, mine is—so I say the same thing, but more emphatically."

"Well," she said, "I tried. I can't do anything else. You're as stubborn as these fools in town, so we'll wait until someone else gets killed."

She wouldn't even let him dismount when they reached her house in town. "I can unsaddle my horse," she said. "You go back to Jason."

"Sure. But I'm grateful anyway, Louise, for all you did."

"That's all right, Sam." She walked over and stood beside his horse, looking up at him in the early darkness. "Sam, I'm worried. I wasn't going to tell you, but I must. It's Turkel."

"Now you stop fretting about him. I sent him on his way."

"I heard them bragging. The three of them, but Turkel had the idea. They were going to get word to some gunmen Turkel knew. They figured with some good gunslingers they could keep the town as if they owned it. I'm afraid Turkel will find those friends of his and come back."

"We'll face that when it happens," Sam assured her. "I don't think it will. Now you get some rest. Been a busy day for all of us—and thanks again for making the house look like a woman lived there."

She touched his hand. "I'm sorry I was mad, Sam. I can't help it, sometimes. The people here are so—so—danged thick-headed and then you have to get mule-headed . . ."

"Easy," he cautioned her. "You're boiling again."

"All right, Sam. Good night. And Sam. Don't make Jason ride to town. He isn't ready for it. I know."

"I won't. I'm not going to push him, Louise."

He sat there and watched her lead the horse away. He marveled at the trimness of her and remembered the softness and warmth of her touch. Then he rode away. He didn't go farther into town but he noticed that the hitchracks were full again and there were people on the streets and even Hank Forbes' store was lamplit and open for business.

Jason sat in Amanda's old rocker on the postage-stamp front porch of the house. He was obeying the sedative effects of a very full stomach by dozing, and he didn't hear Sam ride up until he dismounted. Then Jason ran out to meet him and took charge of the horse.

When he walked into the kitchen a few minutes later, he found his father enjoying a slab of pie, and Jason had some apprehension that Sam might recall just how much pie there'd been when he rode off with Louise.

"Sit down," Sam said. "Fill up, son."

"I -ain't so hungry," Jason said.

"I can see why. When it comes to eating pie and cake, you're pretty much man-sized, Jase."

"Yes, sir," Jason said.

"How come you're not in bed?"

"I wasn't tired. But I'll bet you are, Pa."

"Yes, sir, I am. Shooting a man, busting another one's arm, buffaloing a third . . . All that's tiring work, son."

"I guess you didn't find any joy in it, Pa."

"There's no joy in hurting people. Not even those you have to hurt to save your own neck. That really doesn't mean much. But a ranch like this, hard work, watching things grow and knowing you're secure—that's important. That and pie. Pie can be mighty important, too."

"Sure," Jase said. "I'll cut into the other one for you, Pa."



Nothing more important than pie. I might even try a small piece myself, come to think of it."

Sam had to finish the slab Jason cut for himself, but Sam didn't mind one bit. He let Jason go off to bed and looked in on him ten seconds after he heard the bedsprings squeak. Jason was already asleep.

Sam walked out to the porch and sat down. The darkness was now all-enveloping and he felt lost in it. This was the time when he missed Amanda most. She should have been beside him while they planned and talked of the days to come and figured out how many new head they should add next year. Talk about the coming of the railroad, when cattle drives would be shorter and cheaper, and a man could make a dollar. Talk about what color the house should be next time they painted—or even what color the sunset had been if they'd had time to see it.

He thought less and less of the old days. The wild days when he acted just as Turkel and his friends had acted in Winter Gap.

This was much better. He set his feet on the porch rail, leaned back and rolled a cigarette. The sweet smoke curled up around his face and he laughed and thought he'd enjoyed that brief bit of silence. Enjoyed it as the last one he'd go through. His right fist hurt where he'd hit Maxon Brown.

He smoked the cigarette until it burned his fingers and he became aware that now his thoughts were concerned only with Louise. He stomped on the butt and walked angrily into the house, almost slamming the door.

The peace and quiet Sam sought returned to him again and he was gratified by it, although he felt uneasy. As if there was something in the air. He and Jason worked hard around the ranch and after a few more days the uneasiness passed until it seemed that there was nothing to disrupt Sam's quiet and happy life. He often thought of Louise, but there'd been no reason to go into town since the fracas and he could never let a woman even guess he might be coming to see her without any other excuse . . .

They came in the middle of the afternoon—five of them, but four remained out on the wagon road while Packey Turkel rode alone up to the ranch house. Jason saw him, but Jason had no idea who he was, though the boy began to feel danger closing in. He ran to the barn.

"I've riders, Pa," he said. "One of 'em's coming to the house alone. The others are on the road and they don't look friendly to me."

Sam needed but one look. "Go into the house, Jase."

"Pa, you know these jaspers?"

"Into the house. Pronto! Move!"

Jason reluctantly obeyed. Sam walked out to meet Turkel.

"Far enough," Sam said curtly. "Haul up, Packey, right there."

"Sure," Packey said. "Take a look out to the road, Sam. There's Maxon Brown and Al Hadley over there—and a couple of our friends."

"What do you want?" Sam asked.

"I'll make it short, but not so sweet, Sam. We're goin' back to Winter Gap and we'll be nice and peaceable until seven o'clock. Then we're aimin' to take that town to pieces—and we're invitin' you to try and stop us."

"You got your gunslinger friends," Sam said. "I can't see 'em from here—who they are . . ."

"You'll find out, Sam. And come with a gun because it ain't goin' to make any difference if you don't. You draw and shoot, Sam, and get yourself killed. Unless you want the town busted up."

Sam said, "You got ten seconds to ride off or I'll haul you down off that horse and break your miserable dirty neck."

"I'll ride," Packey said. "But so will you. And Sam—if you don't show up, we'll come here and get you. There just ain't no way you can win."

He wheeled the horse and rode back, joining the others who were already moving away, now that they saw Packey was unmolested. Nobody looked back and Sam shaded his eyes to try and identify the two new men, but the distance was too great.

Jason opened the door for him. "Pa—they going to make trouble?"

"Seems so, Jase."

"You going to make 'em back down?"

"I don't know, son. It's all happened too fast. I need time to think."

"I heard what he said. If they bust up the town, some folks are goin' to get killed and hurt."

"Unless the town fights back."

"You think they will?"

"No. No. Jase, I don't think they will."

"Then you better go in after 'em, Pa."

Sam sat down heavily. "You know of any good reason why I should?"

"Sure—your friends might get hurt."

"What friends?"

"Louise."

The boy was so all-fired wise, Sam thought. He knew precisely his father's weakness, probably even guessed the fact that he liked Louise perhaps a little more than mere friendship warranted. At any rate, he knew his father would defend her.

"Yes," Sam said. "If I ride in, it will be because of Louise."

"Pa, you want me to ride in and tell her?"

"Jase—do you think you could ride into town?"

"I'd be mighty sick, I reckon, but I'd make it if I had to. For her."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Jase. But I'll go in."

"Pa," the boy's face was worried. "Please don't go in without—"

Sam interrupted him. "Fetch the gun, Jase."

The boy raced across the room to take the gun belt from its peg. He placed it on the table before his father.

Sam said, "I swore to your mother I'd never put this on again unless there was no help for it. Looks like this is the time, Jase. There just ain't any help for it. I'll ride in later this afternoon. They won't make trouble until they know I'm not coming. Now—you're to stay here. Do you understand, Jase?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your ma wouldn't approve," Sam said, "but I think she'd let me go under the circumstances. So I better get washed up and dressed."

Sam moved slowly, holding his nerves down, refusing to worry about what might happen. He was going to face five men. Three, perhaps, he might quell with words, but not the other two. And yet, when he buckled on the gun, he was calm enough and the weight of the weapon gave him confidence. He walked out to where Jason had his horse saddled and ready. It was still two hours until the time limit and he didn't mean to hurry.

"So long, Jase," he said.

"Say hello to Ma for me," Jason said.

The kid never missed a trick, Sam thought. "I'll do that."

"And I'll stay inside and maybe get some work done around the house if you'll bring me back some of Louise's biscuits."

Sam could have hugged him for that, but he merely promised and made up his mind he'd keep the promise. He rode off and Jase walked slowly back to the house.

Sam rode quite casually down the road until he came to the knoll and the green, beautiful spot where Amanda and Louise's father lay. He dismounted and stepped over the low gate without bothering to open it. He moved up to the two graves and stood at the foot, between both of them.

"I made my promise, Amanda," he said quietly. "I meant it when I swore I'd never buckle on this gun again unless I had to defend myself. Well, that's how it is now. So don't you worry none. All I want is for you to understand. I reckon Myron Amister understands, all right."

He turned away and went back to his horse, headed for town. Before he got there, he was humming softly. He was glad he was going to see Louise.

EIGHT

APPARENTLY the five men had been acting peaceably so far because the town wasn't locked up tight as before. Sam guessed he had an hour or more before the deadline which Tarkel had set. He walked toward the bakeshop and was happy to find no customers and Louise busy in the back room.

She had heard what was going on. She hurried up to Sam and for a moment he thought she was about to throw her arms about him—and he also thought he wouldn't have minded.

She saw the gun and she stopped just short of embracing him. Perhaps it was the sight of the gun or the memory of Amanda. Whatever caused her to stop also created a note of worry in her voice.

"Sam—Sam, it's bad this time, isn't it?"

"Well," he said with a lightness he didn't feel, "I've been up against worse situations."

"They are supposed to have a pair of deadly gunmen along for the sole purpose of killing you."

"So Turkel told me. I didn't get a look at those two gents, but if they cotton to a man like Turkel and his kind, they can't be much. I wouldn't worry."

"Jason—didn't come?"

"No. I left him at the ranch. He'll be fine. Last thing he said was that I should bring back something from the bakery."

"Bless him," Louise said fervently. "If he has that kind of faith, why shouldn't I have it, too? You stop by, Sam, and I'll have the biggest bag of sweets that ever insulted a small boy's stomach."

"Good. I won't be long, Louise."

"Sam," she said hesitantly, "there's just one thing more. You—you won't be angry?"

"Heck, woman, how can I say I won't be angry when I don't know what in tarnation you're going to ask? Honestly, you remind me more and more of Amanda."

"That's good," Louise said promptly. "I'd very much like to be half the woman Amanda was: I mean—this, Sam."

From beneath her apron, she took her father's badge from her dress pocket. She placed the badge carefully on the counter and he could see how she had kept it polished. It was a unique badge—a four-pointed star, with only the stub of the fifth point, that had been shot clean off by the .44 slug that had killed Myron Amister.

"I don't know what you're getting at, Louise," he said.

"You don't have to wear it. Just—put it in your pocket, Sam. Maybe, if you have to shoot, then it might be that the badge would give you some sort of unofficial status . . ."

"There's no such thing as unofficial status when it comes to being a peace officer," he said. "You either are one or you're not."

"Take it, anyway, Sam. For me?"

He picked up the badge. "Can't see where it'll do any harm, if that's how you want it, Louise. I guess I'm a little proud to be carrying it, at that. Your pa was quite a man."

"Yes. But not tough enough for this town."

"Meaning I am?"

"Sam, you're exactly what Winter Gap needs."

"Oh, no," he said hastily. "I'm not walking into that trap. They don't want a lawman here and I'm not the one to force one on them."

He hefted the badge in the palm of his hand a couple of times, smiled and slipped it into his pocket. Then he walked

out. He left his horse racked in front of the bakery and walked casually down the wooden sidewalk.

Suddenly he noticed the difference from when he had first ridden in. The street was empty, just as it had been that day when Turkel and his companions were trying to drink the town dry and shooting at anything that moved.

Sam touched the butt of his sixgun, but he didn't slide it in and out of the holster. He knew it was free, the leather well oiled, the gun quick on the trigger. He was afraid of no man, but within him was a definite dread of having to kill someone. Amanda's influence persisted this long after her death. Killing was no longer any part of Sam's existence—but it seemed he couldn't stay away from it.

They'd be in the Gold Eagle. Men who intended to get drunk and not pay for their liquor, always began in the best place in town. He stepped up to the batwings and looked over them. The five men were lined up at the bar. The moment he stepped inside, they'd spot him in the back bar mirror. All five would turn, all five would draw, because men of their kind never gave anyone a chance.

Sam made his plans quickly. He'd take the two rangy men on the right. They were the strangers, the gunslicks. If he could get them fast, Turkel might try a shot, but Maxon Brown and Al Hadley would lose their nerve instantly. Hadley was not dangerous with his gun arm in a sling, anyhow.

Sam raised his foot and kicked the doors open as hard as he could. The bang of the twin lattice doors against the walls made the five turn quickly. Sam moved in fast. Ten feet away he stopped and nodded in curt fashion to the two strangers.

"Been some time, Nat. Luke . . ."

The two men stared at him. The thinner one, Luke, suddenly laughed nervously. "I'll be jiggered," he said. "It's Sam Bishop. The name didn't mean nothing when Turkel said it because I figured Sam Bishop got himself killed some place a long time ago."

"It's Sam Bishop—in one piece, Luke. How'd you two happen to take up with three tinborns like Turkel and his friends?"

Nat was the heavier man, though not by much. He was a soiledraven and dirty, as Sam used to be in the old days. Nat rubbed the stubble of beard on his chin and laughed.

"I'll tell you one thing, Sam, if we'd known it was you, we wouldn't be here."

"Well, now that you do know," Sam said in that same savagely cold voice, "suppose you mosey along. Take them three saddle bums with you and don't come back."

Nat's sun-wrinkled face clouded in anger. "You ain't very friendly, Sam. I don't take to a man who ain't friendly."

"Then pull your gun, Nat, because I'm not aiming to stand here and jabber all day."

Nat glanced at his fellow gunslick. Luke shrugged, poured another drink, put it down in one swallow and took a hitch on his belt.

"Ain't a very friendly town you got here, either, Sam, but if you like it we don't aim to spoil it. No hard feelings, Sam?"

"None—if you leave pronto."

"Now see here," Turkel said belligerently, "you don't own Winter Gap." He turned to Nat and Luke. "There are five of us. What're you scared of? Last I knew, you wasn't scared of anything or anybody."

Luke laughed, looking conspiratorially at Sam as he spoke. "Trouble is, Turkel, you never saw Sam Bishop when he got mad. I watched more'n one fast man with a gun back away from Sam. Just like I'm backing now, because I got a strong liking to live. You want to tackle him, you just go right ahead, Turkel, and shoot Sam Bishop. It'll make you a big man in Arizona. In the whole scope of country west of the Mississippi, I'd say."

Nat ceremoniously poured two more drinks, raised his glass to Sam. "We ain't defyin' you, Sam. We're just showin' we ain't all yellow. Besides, we need this one for the road."

Turkel was still confident in the numbers on his side. In a showdown he was sure Nat and Luke would join him. Turkel leaned against the bar and eyed Sam with a faint contempt.

"Maybe Sam is a gunslick like you say. Maybe he once ran in fast company, and maybe he's dangerous to tangle with, but I always had an idea this was a free country. So I'm askin' you, Sam, who said you can order us out of town?"

Sam's anger was at the seething point. He didn't want to draw. He hoped that his past dark reputation would get him out of this with no gunplay. There was still a chance and, while he hated to use it, there seemed to be no other way out. He reached into his pocket, took out the badge with the missing point and pinned it to his vest.

Turkel peered at it. "That's Amister's old star, ain't it? You steppin' into his boots, Sam?"

"I'm in them," Sam replied curily.

"Who said so?" Turkel demanded. "Nobody wants any law in Winter Gap. It's a wide-open town. You're bluffin', Sam. You ain't the regular elected marshal here."

"What would you say to that, Nat?" Sam asked. "And you, Luke?"

"Well, now, if you say you're marshal here, I'd agree with you, Sam," Luke replied. "And I'm gettin' a little uneasy. Nat, let's talk."

"I'm ready," Nat agreed.

"Now hold on," Turkel insisted. "Sam can't order us out. We got rights, like anybody else. Al, you go fetch Hank Forbes and Judge Glover. They run this town and they didn't appoint nobody marshal."

Nat shook his head. "I tell you, Turkel, you're just a plain fool. Sam's gettin' mad now. He's got a sixgun says he is what he claims he is, and I seen that gun shoot before, so I'm sayin' good luck and good-by. If you got any sense, which most maybe you ain't, you'll do the same."

Al Hadley, who had scooted out at Turkel's order, was already back. He'd found the Judge and Hank Forbes just outside the door, pondering the wisdom of interfering. Now they both strode in behind Al.

Nat and Luke sidled toward the batwings and quietly walked out. They were clearing the edge of town about the time Sam's ire was rising to the explosion point.

"It's all very well for you to say you've made yourself marshal of Winter Gap," Hank Forbes told Sam. "But you have to be hired by the town to make it stick, and I'm against the whole idea."

"See what I told you!" Turkel exclaimed triumphantly. "Sam's just takin' it on himself, that's all."

"Shut up," Forbes said to Turkel. He addressed Sam again. "I don't hold for anything these hyenas do, and they're goin' to ride out, but not because you order them to, Sam."

"You want me to take off this badge?" Sam asked.

"That's about it."

"You take it off," Sam said very pleasantly.

Forbes backed up a step. "I'm not going to tangle with you, Sam. No need to. But you can't just appoint yourself marshal and start ordering people around."

"You're doing some ordering, I notice, Hank. Who appointed you?"

"Somebody has to take charge. Somebody has to speak up."

"That's what I'm doing—taking charge and speaking up. A little while ago, Turkel stopped by my ranch and told me if I didn't ride into town and get myself shot up, he'd shoot up the town—him and his pals. So I rode in because I didn't want anybody hurt like my Amanda was—killed. I was willing to lay my life on the line to stop that, but I don't think you would have. You'd go running for help, Hank, and you'd expect to get it. But who would you run to? Who does represent the law here?"

"All well and good," Forbes said patiently. "I agree. We'll have law here some day, but it'll be done legally by everybody in Winter Gap. Now take off that badge, Sam, and go about your business like a sensible man."

"I'm part of this town, Hank. I got me a nice spread near here. I need the town, but it's no good if it runs hog-wild. I say I have a big interest in Winter Gap and I aim to protect it, if I have to do it with a gun. So the badge stays, and until folks appoint a good man as peace officer, I'll be it. And my first official act—or unofficial, if you want to call it that—is to order Turkel and them buzzards with him to ride on."

"Not me," Turkel said. "I like it here."

"Good, Turkel. You can stay forever, but where you can't do anybody harm or trouble. So make your play and let's get it over with."

"Sam," Hank Forbes objected, "are you saying you'll shoot Turkel if he doesn't leave?"

"He threatened me. I'm threatening him, and I don't need a pair of hired gunslingers to back me. Turkel, if you don't stand up to me, I'm going to chop you to pieces with my gun barrel."

Maxon Brown pointed to his injured arm in its sling. "I sure ain't in shape for trouble. I'm ridin'."

"I had enough, too," Al Hadley agreed. "Tukel's a lot of talk, anyhow."

Tukel looked about, more dismayed than belligerent. "That settles it. If nobody wants to tangle with this locoed fool who thinks he's marshal, why should I hold the bag? I'm ridin', Sam, but I ain't forgettin'."

"Be healthier if you did, Turkel."

Tukel shrugged and moved off. Sam spoke in a sharp voice: "Hold on."

Turkel stopped and his shoulders grew stiff, his body tensed. Without turning around, he said, "I'm doin' as you told me, Sam. You'll have to shoot me in the back."

"Pay for the drinks you and your friends had," Sam ordered brusquely.

Turkel did turn around and he smiled disarmingly. "Can't do it, Sam. I'm busted."

"Then leave your horse and saddle. I'll sell them and turn the money over to the saloon man."

Turkel sighed and found the money. He was about to slap it contemptuously on the bar, but a quick look at Sam's grim face changed his mind. Turkel put the money down and walked out.

As the batwings slapped, followed by the drum of hoof-beats, Judge Glover threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"You sure trimmed them down to a mighty small size, Sam. Now you can take off the badge." Glover laughed again at Hank Forbes' puzzled expression. "Can't you see Sam was using the badge to make them saddle-bums ride on?"

"The badge stays," Sam said quietly. The saloon was well filled with people by now. Sam put his back against the bar and addressed them all. "You know who I am. You know what this wild town did to my wife, and my son. You think hard enough and you'll also realize this could happen to your wife and your kids. Somebody has to see that it's stopped and if nobody else will, I'll have to do it."

"Exactly what do you mean by that, Sam?" Forbes wanted to know. There were murmurs among some of the other men, too. Nobody walked over to stand beside Sam and back him. He could sense the general animosity as the meaning of his intentions sank in.

"I got a ranch to run," Sam said, addressing them all. "It needs every bit of my time, but if a man has a ranch with no town where he can buy his supplies and sell some of his stuff, then what's the sense in running a ranch or anything else? Long as a man can't feel safe in Winter Gap, then he has no town. What I'm going to do is make this town safe."

"By whose authority?" Forbes demanded.

"I'm wearing a gun, Hank. Two pretty good gun-slingers backed away from a fight with me, so that'll give you a rough idea of how good I am with this gun. That will be my authority. If there are any objections, let the man who makes them

step out—and be wearing his gun. Otherwise, I'll listen to nobody."

"You just proclaim yourself lawman and that's all? We have to swallow it?" Judge Glover asked.

"That's the fast and clear way of saying it, Judge."

"But you can't arrest anyone, Sam," the Judge argued. "No court will recognize your badge because it ain't legal."

"Then make it legal," Sam said. "You're going to obey it, anyway, so if being legal makes it any easier, just go ahead and swear me in. Though I can't say I see how that'd be legal either, seeing nobody in this town has been elected to anything and can't administer an oath under any conditions."

"Sam," a man in the audience asked, "what'll you do?"

"See there's no more wild shooting. Make sure your kin-folk and mine can walk the street in safety. And a few more things. Like mending sidewalks, cleaning up the mud, running a quiet and respectable place."

"What else?" Forbes asked glumly.

"If there's trouble in any saloon because some ornery galoot has had too much to drink, I'll close the place. I'll close it with a lock on the door or I'll shoot it up if anybody bucks me. No drunks on the street and no fights—not even with fists. Anybody cuts loose and rides hell-for-leather up and down the street, he gets arrested."

"Sam," Judge Glover warned, "if you arrest anybody, you'll be guilty of committing a crime, can't you see that?"

"Sure I can," Sam said cheerfully. "But tell me this, Judge: Who's going to arrest me? Way I see it, the law in Winter Gap depends on the fastest gun. I say I'm the fastest so I'm taking charge. And believe me, folks, it's better that it's my gun than somebody's like Turkel."

Forbes shook his head. "I won't try to stop you unless things get out of hand. You'll get mighty sick of it soon enough and, mind you this, nobody's going to pay you a red cent."

"I'm not asking for it," Sam said. "But from now on, there's law in Winter Gap and I'm it. Those who need help and want mine, can call on me. Those who don't, just stay out of my way."

He walked out casually and before he had crossed the muddy street, he heard the beginning of the laughter and he knew that was going to be the worst of all. They would refuse to take him seriously. The only way he could impress upon

them the fact that he meant every word was by a show of violence on his part. He didn't look forward to the time.

He knew where he was automatically headed. Louise hadn't closed up shop and she'd be waiting for him. He pushed open the door and she looked out from the back room and reached for the pot of coffee. He sat down to sandwiches, coffee and pie.

"I heard some of what you said," Louise told him. "I'm proud of you, Sam. If Pa could know, he'd bust buttons that it's his badge you're wearing."

Sam touched the star. "I don't think it's going to work, Louise. I can scare some of them into being orderly, and those who don't scare, I can use fists or bullets on, but that kind of law is not much good. A marshal needs a town that believes in him and works with him. Nobody here wants me."

"They will, Sam."

"Maybe, if I last long enough. At first, they'll probably go along for awhile because of what happened to Amanda and Jase. That'll be a salve to their conscience, but when I start doing things that hurt, they'll turn against me."

"It will work," she insisted. "Because it has to."

"If a town shies clear of law, then they won't cotton to a man who tries to bring some against their wishes. Now suppose there's a fight and I haul in somebody. What then?"

"The marshal's office and the jail are still where Pa left them."

"I'd need a deputy to watch prisoners during the day. I've got a ranch to tend and a son to look after."

Louise nodded understandingly. "Maybe you shouldn't have tackled it in the first place," she said, but the disappointment in her voice touched him.

"All I aim to do, Louise, is sort of get the town used to having somebody wear a badge again. Once they see we're right—you and me—they might hire a marshal. But if it won't work, I have to drop it. You understand that?"

"Just so somebody tries to do something," Louise said earnestly. "Pa tried so hard, and it all seemed as if it was for nothing. A man mustn't die for no purpose, Sam. A man's life just can't be a waste."

"Liable to be, if I meet some ornery critter who thinks my back might be a good target. Well, I better get out and start long the marshal nobody wants. You hear a good-sized ruckus gung on, that'll be me enforcing the law."

"Good luck, Sam," she said. There was warmth enough in her eyes and in her smile to make Sam think perhaps the whole thing was worthwhile, and then he put such ideas out of his mind. He was married to a ranch, a small son, and a memory. He walked out of the bakery rather fast.

NINE

HE was intrigued by the comparative quiet of Main Street as he began to walk along it. Probably everyone who might expect to be abroad at this hour was busily engaged elsewhere, talking about the new marshal who wasn't a marshal.

He stopped a few moments and looked down the length of the street. There wasn't much about this town to be proud of. There were two saloons for one of any store. The two-story hotel was the largest building and had a porch wide enough to accommodate several rocking chairs. The other shops were quite ordinary. A general store on a smaller scale than Hank Forbes', a saloon, the millinery store where Amanda used to buy those hats she wore so attractively on the side of her head. Next to this another saloon, then a hardware store and a third saloon, followed by the livery stable which spread all the way to the corner and included a feed store. Across from that, the Gold Eagle Saloon and then Hank's emporium, the largest in town. A butcher shop, Doc Evans' office with Judge Glover's next door. Following, without a break for a saloon, was the town jail. Its windows and door were boarded up and had been since the day after Myron Amister's funeral.

The opposite side of Main Street was similar. Beyond this shopping area were the homes of the people who made up Winter Gap. The houses were small and built clear out to the indefinite limits of the town in haphazard locations. It was isolated, compact, busy, thriving and, so far as Sam was concerned, not worth a damn. Yet he had settled here and driven his roots so deeply he couldn't pull them up without suffering a loss he wouldn't be able to stand. Therefore he had to do something about making the town a little better.

He resumed walking and came to a hole in the wooden

sidewalk which used to irk Amanda. An unwary person could break an ankle by stepping into that ragged hole in the wooden planks. It was in front of Bide Miller's butcher shop. Bide was noted for a short temper and a parsimonious nature. Sam walked in.

Bide studied the badge. "Sam, I think you're crazy," he said. "Somebody'll shoot another point off that star and they'll plant you alongside Myron Amister."

"Maybe, Bide. Now first thing in the morning you get out and fix that danged sidewalk. You understand me, Bide?"

"I understand you fine, Sam, but I ain't going to do it. Sidewalk's the responsibility of the town, not mine."

"This town has no taxes and no government, so each citizen takes care of his own property. You fix the sidewalk so it's safe to step on by the time I get back in town tomorrow night."

"Suppose I don't, Sam. What'll you do, arrest me? You and that shot-up old badge!"

Sam walked out. He was keeping his temper in check and he meant to as long as possible, though he suspected the time was soon coming when he'd have to let off steam. He took up a position in front of the boarded-up marshal's office and lit a cigarette which he had carefully tailored so as to take as much time as possible. A few people went by, some spoke, some did not.

Oddly enough, the town seemed quieter than it ever had been and by ten o'clock Sam was bored by the inactivity. Now and then there was a boisterous laugh from one of the saloons, but that was hardly enough to bring a lawman into action. Sam kept patrolling up and down the street. He saw Louise turn out the lamps in her store and walk the half-block to the brown-painted bungalow her father had built.

He thought a great deal about Louise. Amanda had been the perfect wife, the woman without a flaw, and Louise seemed to be generally in the same category of perfection. She was hard-headed, perhaps less emotional about things than Amanda, but there was the same potential for love within her. She encouraged no man and had gone out very little. Since her father had been killed, she had kept completely to herself.

These boring lulls, this self-imposed isolation, made Sam think too much. He was happy, at midnight, to fetch his horse from the livery stable and ride back to the ranch.

Jason was seated at the kitchen table, the lamp lit, and he had pillowed his head against the crook of his right arm so that he slept uncomfortably but soundly. Sam let the door slam shut and Jase was instantly awake, trying hard to promote the lie that he hadn't been asleep at all.

"I'm sorry I took so long," Sam said, but he didn't have to go into any explanation.

"You're wearing Mr. Amister's badge," Jase cried out. "Pa—you're marshal here now."

"Well, not exactly, Jase. I'm marshal by my own say-so, but I don't think anybody else agrees."

"Them five men?"

"No trouble there, Jase. The two gunslingers knew me. We'd met long ago and they remembered and they didn't want any part of a fight. Turkel and his two friends pulled out, too. If they come back, I'll clap 'em in jail and they know it."

"But I wouldn't be afraid to go into town now, Pa."

"Well, for the time being, we won't put it to the test, Jase. Trouble is, I don't know how this will work out. I got the ranch, but I have to patrol in town every night . . ."

"I'll do twice as much here, Pa."

"I guess you'll have to, Jase. Oh, I'll do my share, but nights you're going to be alone."

"I won't mind. And I sure ain't scared. Nobody's going to rile me when my pa's the marshal."

"And it's only for awhile," Sam warned. "Soon's I get folks interested in having a regular lawman, I'll quit. Until then, we'll do the best we can. If the ranch starts sliding, then I'll stop wearing the star. Right now, I'm too tired to think, so let's get to bed."

The following day, Jase pestered Sam with a hundred questions about the night before. When he rode away toward town that evening, Jase stood on the porch and, beaming with pride, his eyes followed Sam's figure until it disappeared in the darkness. It wasn't going to work out, Sam knew. He couldn't handle two such important jobs. If he was accepted, sooner or later somebody was going to need him in the daytime and that would mean a long interruption of his own work. He didn't owe the town that much. In fact, he didn't owe it a thing.

He stayed away from Louise's bakery and started his work

by inspecting the unmended hole in the sidewalk in front of Bide Miller's butcher shop. Sam walked into the store, marched behind the counter and picked up Bide's heaviest meat cleaver. He transferred half a side of beef to the top of another counter and, using the cleaver, he ripped the top off the smaller counter.

"What in the devil you doing?" Bide howled. "Sam, you gone loco?"

Sam ripped the thick board loose, carried it to the front door. "I told you to fix that sidewalk, Bide, and you didn't seem inclined to do as I said, so I'm doing it for you."

"But that's a piece of hard wood I had to freight in! And that's my best cleaver!"

Sam kneeled on the sidewalk. He slashed at the broken board with the cleaver, making the hole larger, while Bide threatened him with everything from arrest to hanging. Sam got the old board clear and removed the nails. Then he shaped the now extended hole so the counter board would fit snugly and, using the old nails, he pounded it into place. He was pretty sure the mending job was better than the original for strength. He walked back into the shop, followed by the still irate Bide, and drove the cleaver deep into the wooden block.

"Next time I tell you to do something, you do it, or I'll send you a bill for my work, Bide. Another thing, you got a cooler in back so keep your meat in it. You know how it spoils in this weather. You sell bad meat, Bide, and I'll lock you up."

"You ain't even a lawman," Bide groaned. "Sam, you've gone plain crazy. Mending that hole cost me a counter and my cleaver. Takes me a week to make enough to replace 'em."

"So long, Bide. Remember what I said about cooling the meat."

Sam walked out to the street and stopped in front of the boarded-up marshal's office. He tested one of the boards across the entrance, found it loose enough to pull free with ease. The others were just as easily removed and in a matter of minutes he had the doorway cleared and he went on into the dusty, dank and dark office. The rusty cell door was swung open. The windows in the two cells had been broken by boys playing jail break.

There was oil in the lamps, however, and Sam lit two of them and dusted off the desk and chair before he sat down and called himself an idiot.

Louise must have seen the lights. She hurried across the street and walked into the office. She looked around at the shabby place and then walked to a closet and found a broom in it. She began industriously to sweep out the place.

"No sense in it," Sam said disconsolately. "No sense at all, Louise. I been thinking it over and I've got no right to be here. No right to say I'm the law and use my sixgun to back it up. I'm making enemies out of my friends and there's bound to be a showdown sometime soon."

"You have to expect it," Louise said, and kept on with her sweeping.

He took the broom out of her hands. "What happens when somebody I like stands up to me? I can't draw and shoot. All I can do is turn my back and walk away, and that'll be the end to my badge-wearing."

She faced him squarely. "All right, Sam Bishop. You just unpin that badge and hand it back to me until I can find a man with enough nerve to wear it. I thought you'd be the one, but not any more. I'm sick and tired of hearing you complain and complain, and wonder what you'll do under conditions that may never arise. If any man faces up to you and dares you to do anything, he's not your friend and you don't have to consider him as such. I thought you'd realize that a lawman doesn't have friends, anyhow."

"Maybe," he suggested angrily, "you got somebody else in mind for this badge."

"I wish I had, Sam. How I wish I had! I'm so—so god-darned mad I'm going to close up my bakery and leave Winter Gap. It's not worth staying here. For the first time, I know Pa was wrong in giving his life for a town that never did appreciate him and never will. That goes for you, too, Sam. I've had enough."

"Damn it, Louise," he shouted, "you don't give a man half a chance . . ."

"Don't swear at me, dang you," she shouted back at him. "You're—you're just . . . no . . . g-good!"

His hands were on her slim shoulders, his fingers digging into her flesh. His face was close to hers and he could look right into those clear eyes, almost look through them into her sputtering brain. The nearness of her seemed to smother

him and suddenly he wanted to draw her closer and hold her and comfort her and say the things a woman likes to hear.

Just as suddenly he thrust her to arm's length and he saw that her anger had vanished too and she was staring at him as if she saw him for the first time, too, in this new light.

"I'm sorry, Sam," she said, and moved away from him. "I just get so mad."

"You got a right to, Louise. I'm not quitting. Not yet. Like you said, if somebody doesn't tame this town down, your pa gave up his life for nothing and we can't let that be."

"Do you mean it, Sam?"

"What the heck would I do, going home without a sack of sweet cakes for Jason?" he asked with a grin. "And who'd I have to yell at if you left? We're both staying, Louise, because we belong here. There are two graves up on the knoll that say so. Now clean out this jailhouse and I'll go see if I can round up somebody to be our first guest."

She plied the broom with renewed will and vigor, creating such a cloud of dust that Sam beat a quick retreat out the door. When he passed by an hour later, she was gone and only one lamp was lit, but there was enough light to show that everything was as tidy as if the office had been in constant use.

On the desk lay a thick book lettered in gold leaf, *Elementary Law*. On the flyleaf was written Myron Amister's name and his title as marshal. Sam grinned and thrust the book into one of the drawers.

If one person would walk in now and admit he needed Sam's help, the situation might change completely, but after a half-hour of waiting, Sam knew it wasn't going to happen that way.

Then loud voices, cursing and the sounds of a struggle indicated there was some sort of a ruckus down the street. Sam ran out and headed toward the origin of all the noise. It was outside the Gold Eagle and most of the racket was being caused by a tough rooster of a trail hand named Keever. He was five feet five of wiry muscle and he liked to fight when he drank too much. At the moment he had drunk far too much and he was hammering at the elusive target offered by a seventeen-year-old hand named Bradshaw from one of the small and unsuccessful ranches just outside of town.

In a close, toe-to-toe fight young Bradshaw wouldn't have

had a chance against this smaller but much stronger man. As it was, Bradshaw could stretch out one long arm, push against Keever and keep him at such a distance that Keever's swings only cooled the air.

Then, suddenly, Keever ducked under one of those restraining arms and got close enough to do some real fighting. Stung by the blows, Bradshaw fought back. Keever was peppering the taller man's face with short, hard punches. Sam grabbed Keever by the nape of the neck and yanked him clear.

"Just hold him like that," young Bradshaw said. "You hold him, Sam, and I'll cut him to pieces . . ."

"Stand back," Sam warned. "Lay a hand on him again and I'll lock you up. Understand me, Bradshaw? I'll slap your fool head with my gun barrel and throw you in jail."

Bradshaw might have given way to his anger, but at that moment the combination of pouring too much to drink into a stomach too inexperienced and young to handle the red-eye, made him turn a pale yellow and clutch at his stomach. He turned and raced for the nearest alley.

"You leggo o' me," Keever said tartly. "I'm tellin' you, Sam, you got no right—"

Sam's patience was at the end. He retained his hold on the nape of Keever's neck. "You're drunk, fighting drunk, and you ain't safe to be running around loose," Sam said. "You're under arrest."

"But you ain't no lawman," Keever shouted. "You can't do this."

"It's for your own good. You're that ornery drunk, somebody's liable to kill you before morning. Now quiet down and march to the jail. March, or I'll buffalo you and sling you over my shoulder."

This was an interesting event. People who witnessed it, raced to spread the news and by the time the struggling, squirming Keever was being propelled down the sidewalk by Sam, everybody still awake was on the street watching and yelling encouragement to Keever. Not one voice favored Sam and the bitterness of the moment made his anger all the more real.

He shoved Keever into the office, grabbed his arm and propelled him across the room and into one of the two cells. He slammed the door and then realized he had no key.

He left Keever there and went to the desk to rummage

through it for the cell keys. Outside, some of the people were pressed against the windows, others were craning to look in via the open door. There was a lot of jeering laughter and a few shouted suggestions for Kever's benefit.

Sam's hands found nothing but dust in the drawers. If there were keys, they were certainly not in the office. He bent down to peer into one of the lower drawers. Outside, a great shout of laughter went up, but Sam paid no heed. **There had to be keys . . .**

Then he glanced toward the door and saw Kever mingled with the crowd of onlookers. He'd merely pushed open the unlocked cell door and staggered out to freedom.

Sam sat down heavily and let the crowd laugh itself out. By twos and threes the people melted away, each time offering some jeering ideas about Sam's fancy jail.

They were all gone when Louise came sheepishly into the office holding the keys on their big iron ring. "I'm sorry, Sam. I forgot about these."

"What difference does it make? You can see how much they respect me and the badge."

"Make them respect both," Louise said curtly. **"Next time they won't laugh."**

"How can there be a next time?" he asked. "I'm a big joke now. If I make another arrest, all I'll do is make a fool of myself."

"They thought Pa was funny, too, when he first wore that badge, but they respected him after he broke up a gunfight that could have wrecked the town, no matter which man won."

"Yes, I remember that. I also remember when he died. He needed help and he didn't get any. He was a brave man, Louise. You got a right to be proud of him, but I think he was foolish, too."

She placed a hand on his arm. "Sam—if my pa had been alive the day Amanda was shot, there wouldn't have been a shooting. He'd have seen to it. But Pa was dead and there was nobody, so Amanda died. It'll happen again and again. For her sake, Sam, make sure it can't happen again."

"But what's the use?" he asked desperately.

"Suppose the next one to die is me?" she asked candidly.

He stared at her. "No!" he said. "That won't happen. I can't let it happen! Trouble with me is that I don't like to use a gun any more. I don't want to hurt people. I should have

buffaloed Keever and tied him up. I'm too soft. You're right, Louise. There must not be a next time."

He walked her home and neither spoke because neither trusted what turn their conversation might take. Their emotions were sharpened to a raw edge, and the fact that the whole town opposed them only served to increase their awareness of each other. He held her elbow lightly, and he knew he could fall in love with this girl if he let himself.

The truth had dawned upon them at the same moment, when their eyes locked and their breaths mingled around the closeness of their lips. It was a completely alien feeling to Louise, this sudden realization she might be in love. It was a strange experience to Sam because he'd believed it could never happen again to him, but it was happening and he suddenly feared it.

At her gate he stepped aside and held it open for her. She didn't look back until she had her front door open and then she smiled wanly and continued on in. Sam walked away swiftly before the impulse to follow her inside became irresistible.

Walking down the street he saw four men lined up shoulder to shoulder, blocking the sidewalk. They were looking for trouble and Sam, unable to thrust Louise from his mind, actually welcomed it.

TEN

HE knew the quartette. One was Lem Bradshaw, the seventeen-year-old cowhand who'd fought with drunken Keever only a short time before. Another was Paul Horgan, who worked as a clerk for Hank Forbes and always had been a troublemaker. The other two were hangers-on who worked only when it became absolutely necessary and spent the rest of the time cadging drinks.

In Sam's mind there was no question but that these four had not only been sent to intercept him, but actually had been told what to do. They were putting him to the test and against four younger men, he didn't have much of a chance, but he had to face up to this situation—or forever back down

and let the town go its bloody, noisy way. At the moment Sam was in no mood to back down to a regiment of giants.

He stopped just short of the four. "You're blocking the sidewalk," he said curtly.

Horgan took over as spokesman for the group and so gave away who was really behind the scheme. Hank Forbes had sent him and this was Hank Forbes' fight, though he'd take no active, physical part in it.

"Well now, so we are," Horgan said with a toothy smile. "All you have to do, Sam, is walk around us."

"I'm going to walk through you," Sam warned, "and I'll jail any of you who tries to stop me."

Bradshaw asked with a loud laugh, "You aimin' to tie some strong rope to the cell door, so we can't get out?"

Horgan was eying Sam's holster. "Sam, if you reach for that gun and shoot, it'll be plain murder and that's a hanging offense even in this town where there ain't any law. Not one of us packs a gun. We don't even have a knife or a club. All we got are our hands. Now, either you step off the sidewalk or you come on through."

Sam had already estimated his chances and they were all but nonexistent. They wouldn't kill him, they'd work him over until he was as good as dead. His sole defense was to take one of them fast, get in his punches first. At least, nobody was going to say he went down without a fight.

He picked Horgan because he appeared to be the leader. Sam gave one short, savage laugh. These were the people he was trying to protect. He was giving up his time, giving his strength and his skill with a sixgun, and all he got in return was a beating up. The anger in him grew rapidly and it felt good to be experiencing it because in the next minute or two he'd need to be very angry.

He took a single long step forward so unexpectedly that they weren't quite prepared. His fist smashed squarely into Paul Horgan's face. It was a blow that left him defenseless against the others because his guard was wide open, but there was vast satisfaction in feeling Horgan's nose and face give way under his knuckles. Horgan dropped where he stood, then the others were on Sam.

Young Bradshaw threw himself on Sam's back, wound an arm around his throat, kept Sam's arms and hands busy trying to dislodge him, enabling the other pair to move in without much danger to themselves.

The first blow was a low punch that would have doubled Sam up in agony except for Bradshaw hanging onto his head and neck. Then there was a rain of blows while Bradshaw's grip was slowly choking him.

A well-aimed, solid fist just over the heart ended it. Sam's knees buckled and he went down. Bradshaw sprang clear and when Sam was on the ground, Bradshaw kicked him under the chin.

Perhaps they would have damaged Sam much more, but people were coming out of houses and stores, and down the street came Louise at a dead run, her face as white as the apron she wore.

Bradshaw and the others propped Horgan up somehow. He was bleeding badly, but he could move. The four took off for the nearest alley and vanished. Louise knelt on the boardwalk and raised Sam's head. His eyes opened. He saw Louise, and had an ironic, twisted smile for her. Then he saw the others, the townspeople he wanted to protect, and his smile changed into a black scowl. Not one of them had made a move to help him, but they were gathered about now, regarding him as a minor curiosity.

He got to his feet with Louise's help and staggered over to the bench in front of the butcher shop. He sat down and let Louise attend to his wounds and lumps.

"It's terrible, Sam," she said. "It's simply awful." She suddenly straightened up and faced the crowd. "All of you should be ashamed of yourselves. Now get out of here. Go on—git! I hate the sight of your foolish faces. Get out!"

They moved away, some sheepishly, some angrily. Sam sighed, took her hand and urged her down on the bench beside him. "All you're doing is making enemies," he said. "You can't afford it. If they get sore, they won't buy your bakery things."

"I'm only trying to make them ashamed of themselves," she said bitterly.

"That's even worse. If they can't look you in the eye, they'll never come in. Louise, we have to face it. There's no use in trying to make people accept law if they don't want it."

"Those were just four young toughs too smart for their britches, Sam."

"That they were, but they were sent to stop me. To humiliate me. To make me throw away this badge and stop play-

ing at being a lawman. Hank Forbes sent them and I expect he paid them."

"Oh, Sam, what'll we do? We can't give up."

"Sure we can," he said with studied cheerfulness. "It's mighty easy. I give you back the badge and I stop trying to make poeple behave. I accept the fact that this is wild country and it's all part of our growing pains when innocent folks get killed."

"You're going to give up, then?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. Not quite yet. Let's go back to your pa's old office. I noticed a law book there. I want to study it a little."

She kept an arm around his waist as they moved down the street toward the marshal's office. He thought it must seem that he depended on a woman too much, but he didn't care. The closeness of her felt good and was also comforting.

She lit the lamps, stood behind him and looked over his shoulder as he turned the pages of the thick, leather-bound volume of common law. He found what he wanted.

"I never was much of a one for reading, but Amanda taught me pretty well. In the back of my mind there's been an idea that a man doesn't have to be sworn in or wear a badge to make an arrest. And there it is. Read that."

"Citizen arrest," Louise read. She nodded slowly. "You do have the right to arrest wrongdoers. They can't say it's illegal, because it isn't. This law book proves it. Pa paid a lot of money to get this, because he wanted to understand what the law could or could not do for a lawman. I guess it was a good investment."

"You go back to your shop," Sam said. "I'm going to mosey around for awhile."

"Be careful, Sam." She touched a swollen part of his face gently. "They may try this again."

"No," he said. "Not unless they want to shoot it out. No man can be expected to let a mob beat him whenever they feel like it. This time I've got to show them that they can't get away with it. Besides, that fight made it kind of personal."

"I'll make some coffee," she said. "That's all I can do. So stop by before you ride back to the ranch."

"I'll do that, and all in one piece, too."

Sam tied down his gun, walked along the street to the nearest saloon and looked over the batwings. He went on to

another. In the third, he saw the two men who had been with Horgan and Bradshaw. Sam pushed open the doors and strode through the suddenly quiet barroom.

"You two," Sam indicated the pair, "walk out of here ahead of me."

"You show us why we got to do like you say," one of them challenged.

"I'll do that," Sam said. He stepped over to the nearest man wearing a gun and jerked it out of its holster. He sent it skidding down the bar. "Pick it up, either one of you. The minute you do, I'll kill you. Pick it up or walk out of here."

He waited ten seconds, and they walked through the barroom and out the door with Sam behind them. He told them to head for the jail and when they reached it, he pushed them into one of the cells, closed the door. This time he was able to lock it.

He went down the street again to the doctor's office. Horgan was there. His lip had been stitched and he was now getting his bruises attended to. Horgan eyed Sam with considerable apprehension. Doc Evans made clucking sounds as he looked at Sam.

"You need some treatment yourself, Sam, but you certainly did a fine job on this bum."

"Finish him up, Doc. I'm going to lock him up."

"Take him now," Doc Evans said. "I can't make him look any prettier."

"On your feet," Sam told Horgan.

"Sam—I'm hurt bad. I want to go home. Let's not keep playing games."

"I can bust you one with my gun barrel and tote you," Sam said. "Your choice."

Horgan got to his feet. He tried bluster. "You ain't no marshal. It's against the law for you to say you are."

"What law?" Sam asked harshly.

"Well—you just can't do it. Hank Forbes will fix you for this, Sam."

"I intend to fix Hank Forbes," Sam said. "But first, there's you. I'm sick of jawing, understand?"

Horgan did. He moved quickly to the door. Four minutes later he was in the second cell. The pair in the first sat side by side on the bunk and made no sound at all.

Sam made his rounds again, but he didn't find Bradshaw. A rider just coming into town said that Bradshaw had

passed him on the North Road. That meant the young cowboy was headed back to his father's ranch. Sam went to the stable and saddled his horse. He rode out the North Road to the rundown ranch house where Bradshaw lived with his father. Sam raked his horse, walked up to the door and opened it without knocking. Young Bradshaw was at the sink, washing. He was drunk enough to be belligerent, especially to a man he had just helped to beat up.

The older Bradshaw, unshaven and wearing old pants and sweat-stained underwear, got quickly to his feet.

"What do you want, Sam?"

"Your son," Sam said. "I'm taking him in."

"Why, Sam, you can't do that. You're no lawman. You got no right to even be in my house."

Sam walked up to him. "Bradshaw, if I had a seventeen-year-old boy who got drunk and raised hell and teamed with three others to beat up a man, I'd hide him until he couldn't sit down for a week. Now, I'm telling you, next time you allow that boy to take a drink, I'll come out here and raise more lumps on you than there are gopher holes on this baling-wire spread of yours."

"You do," Bradshaw threatened, "and I'll have the law on you."

Sam smiled thinly and Bradshaw should have taken warning, but he didn't. The rancher started a swing that never landed because halfway to its target, the arm was suddenly paralyzed. Sam's fist cracked solidly on the point of his chin. The man dropped.

Young Bradshaw made a wild dash for a pegged gunbelt. Sam eased his gun clear. "Go ahead," he invited. "Far as I'm concerned, you lost the right to claim you're just a kid who doesn't know any better."

Bradshaw raised his hands shoulder high. "All right. I know better than to buck a killer."

"That's right. I've killed plenty in my day and I'm right in the mood to resume. We're heading back to town. Move!"

"I'll saddle up . . ."

"You'll walk. Or if you ride, it'll be hanging over my saddle."

Bradshaw walked. He stopped protesting after the first mile and he was staggering by the time he reached town. He wasn't used to walking and he was beginning to endure the added discomfort of a hangover. Even more than that, he

was in the grip of a healthy fear of this man who rode at his heels and kept him on the move.

Sam locked him in the cell with Horgan. "Tomorrow night," he said, "you're going to face a judge. Until then you'll stay here. I'm telling you now—if anybody sets you loose, I'll go after you and not them. If that happens, I'll be the judge right on the spot where I find you, and I'll give you the kind of punishment I think you deserve. I'm sure you know what that means. So cool off. I'll send some grub over in the morning."

They had nothing to say. They were four subdued, suddenly worried young men who realized they'd gotten into something over their heads. Sam didn't bother to lock the office door. He walked up on the street to Louise's bakery and found coffee and sandwiches waiting.

"Well," he said with considerable satisfaction, "I locked up all four. I don't think I'll get away with it, but at least those bums will have something to chew over."

"It's the only way, Sam. I'm proud of you."

"This kind of work gives me an appetite." He grinned as he bit into his third sandwich. "But I'd better be getting back. Jase takes care of himself real good, but I don't like him to be worried."

"I made up a bag of sweets," she said. "I'll fetch it."

"Louise, will you bring the boys some coffee and rolls in the morning? I guess I have to depend on you to help me tame this goldarned town."

He returned to the ranch late and found that Jason had obediently gone to bed, but not to sleep. He was in the kitchen before Sam unsaddled his horse.

Jason took one look at him. "Boy . . . Boy, you got it good, Pa!"

"It took four of them," Sam said, with considerable pride.

"I bet it did."

"And all four are locked in the marshal's jail."

"I guess that'll show them," Jase said. "Pa—you're going to look awful in the morning. Your face is all out of kilter right now and I think it's getting worse."

"Soak a towel in cold water, Jase. We'll do the best we can, but it doesn't matter. The pain goes away fast when you're the winner."

ELEVEN

WHEN Sam rode into town the following evening, he found the street jammed with citizens, as if there were some sort of celebration. Louise was waiting for him in front of her shop, and he dismounted and led his horse over to where she stood.

"Sam, they're going to hold court in the Gold Eagle. They're going to try to make a fool of you. Don't let them."

"Hank Forbes back of it?" he asked.

"He and plenty of others. Frank Glover has appointed himself judge. Sam, they won't do a thing to those boys, but they'll make it seem as if you committed the crime. The word's been around. There couldn't be more excitement at a hanging."

"We'll make it worth their while," Sam said grimly. "I had an idea they'd go through with this to make me look bad, but I've got a trick or two in mind. Coming down to see the fun?"

"I don't know. I may get so goldarned mad, I'll shoot somebody."

"You can use my gun any time," he said with a smile. "Jase says thanks for the sweets. You keep on feeding him this way, he'll bust."

"Not likely, the way he works. Sam, is everything all right at the ranch?"

"Fine. We get along, Louise. I admit it's not like it used to be with Amanda bossing us around and looking after us, but it'll do. I'll drop by later if I get time."

"Don't let them shame you into giving up," she said.

"I've done nothing wrong. Nothing to be ashamed of. Anybody buries his head in the sand, it'll be the town, not me."

He left his horse at the livery and walked down to the jail. His four prisoners were in one cell, the door of which was wide open. They were playing cards and didn't even look up when he entered. He'd expected they wouldn't even be there. It was no difficult matter to open the cell locks with the right tools and Hank Forbes had a store full of them.

Sam said, "I don't know what folks have in mind about this, but you boys understand one thing. You'll do no more drinking in Winter Gap. If I catch one of you with red-eye on your breath, I'll maul you from head to foot and do it every time."

Horgan raised his head from the card game. "Hank Forbes will have something to say about that, Sam. Hank and a lot of other people in this town. You been acting like a tin god, which you ain't. You don't worry us."

"Maybe not, but I will," Sam said. "All right, come on out. If there's going to be a show, let it begin."

"Soon's we're ready," Horgan said.

Sam kicked over the board which they were using as a card table. He grabbed Horgan by the scruff of the neck and hauled him out. Sam sent him reeling wildly across the office floor. The others came out meekly and all four preceded Sam down the street without any further protest.

The Gold Eagle Saloon was packed. A desk from Frank Glover's office had been carted in and set up at the far end of the room. Glover was at the end of the bar, waiting and finding pleasure both in his new-found importance and in the bottle of whiskey before him. When Sam and the four boys came in, Glover walked over to the desk and swacked it with his fist.

"Everybody on their feet," he said, "until the judge sits down."

Nobody paid any attention to him, but Glover hadn't expected they would. Sam herded his prisoners to the front row of chairs. Then he placed the law book on the desk.

"I'm charging these boys with beating me up. That's assault. Enough people saw it all happen so I don't think I have to tell it over again. I'll just sit down and let Hank take over, like he's itching to do."

Hank Forbes sat down on the edge of the desk, spoiling the decorum Frank Glover would have liked. Forbes said, "Sam, everybody in Winter Gap knows what you went through and there ain't a living soul don't sympathize with you, but last night you went too far."

"I think you started it, Hank," Sam said, without getting up. "You set those boys into mocking me and defying me."

"There's no evidence to that effect," Judge Glover said sternly.

"Makes no difference," Forbes said. "The fact remains that

you have no authority, Sam. Wearing a badge don't turn you into a lawman. That's all there is to this."

Sam said, "Frank, you notice I'm not calling you Judge, because nobody appointed you, either. Come to think of it, Hank Forbes is acting like a defense attorney, which he is not. Way it looks, nobody here has any authority. Except me. I've got it, and if you read the section on civilian arrest on page 136 of that law book, Frank, you'll see anybody can make an arrest if there's no appointed lawman around. That's what I did, made a civilian arrest. Now it's up to this court that's got no authority, either, to punish these boys. That's all I got to say. The rest is up to you."

Forbes and Judge Glover hastily read the section of law. The Judge closed the book slowly. "Reckon Sam's about right. You can't go against the printed law and it's all here in this book. The fact that Sam was wearing a badge makes it no different so far as the arrest is concerned. He might as well have been wearing a badge from some lodge for all the law recognizes it. I reckon nobody'll say these four young men didn't start the fight by riling Sam, and he was legally clear when he punched back. However, seeing nobody lost an arm or a leg, the court says the boys go free."

"You got any objections to that?" Forbes asked Sam.

"I expected it, Hank. But you notice I'm still wearing the badge and I don't intend to give it up. I'll patrol the streets and I'll give protection to any who ask for it. If there's a ruckus or a shooting, I'll ask any man here to drop his gun and if he doesn't, I'll draw on him."

"The first man you draw on and kill, unless he's shooting at you, will be murder, Sam," Forbes warned.

"When I draw, they'll be shooting," Sam said. "Or they'd better be. And one more thing, any saloonkeeper who sells or gives whiskey to any of these four boys, gets closed up. I mean that and I'll enforce it. Other than that, we can now close up this court that's got a judge with no authority and a defense attorney without authority and a marshal who's got plenty of six-shooter authority. Don't anybody try to make me prove that."

Sam walked out slowly. The crowd was disappointed. They'd expected more fireworks than this. Louise had been seated at the rear and she waited for Sam and fell into step with him as they left.

"I hoped somebody might tell me I did right," Sam said.

"Just one person—except you, of course. I know you think I did."

"They'll come around, Sam. Inside themselves, they know you're right, but nobody wants to take the initiative and say so. I heard a little talk about how some of the womenfolk feel safer since you started patrolling the street. It's men like Forbes and the saloonkeepers who don't want law and order."

Sam wagged his head. "I still say it won't work. In a way, Hank Forbes is right. I don't have any authority. Matter of fact, if everybody wanted me to be lawman here, there's nobody who can legally appoint me. This town needs an election."

"That would cost money, Sam. That would mean taxes and they want to postpone that day as long as possible. I talk to a great many people every day. Almost all of them say it's not time to organize this town."

"Even if women like Amanda get killed?"

"They say that never happened before and it won't again. You and I know it will, and that's what we're trying to prevent. They refuse to believe it. Something drastic has to happen to make them realize the town can't go on this way, without any head, any recognized authority. Even savages have their chiefs."

"But nobody pays the chiefs' taxes," Sam grumbled. "There's the difference—money! Amanda's death was a tragedy. They say it was a terrible thing, but come right down to it, it didn't cost anybody a dime so they just sit back and hope it won't happen again."

"The women want you in charge, but the men won't listen to them, Sam. Just don't give up."

"If I thought there was a chance, I'd stick with it no matter who got in my way, but as it is now . . . there's just no use, Louise. Sooner or later, I'm going to come up against something I can't handle without using my gun. They're right. If I shoot, it's just another gunfight—a murder—because I'm not a marshal. The badge alone doesn't make me one."

"Just don't give up at this moment, Sam. Something may turn in your favor."

"Not likely it will, but I have to keep on for now. Nothing else for me to do, because I'm in too deep."

She clasped his hand in both of hers and she looked at him squarely, as Amanda used to do. "I was sure you wouldn't

quit. And you'll make them realize they can't do without a marshal. Sam, I'm as proud of you as Amanda would have been. And as Jase must be."

For one exasperating moment, he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her. There was no memory of Amanda during that short lapse of time. There was only Louise who was beautiful, and emotionally wrapped up in what he was doing, and he sensed that she very likely would have responded to his gesture of love.

He left her so abruptly that for a moment she wasn't certain just what he meant by it, but then, woman-like, she realized that he had wanted to take her in his arms, yet he'd turned away, and she knew why. Amanda was dead, but it was still too soon and Sam had been too much in love. There was also Jason, a living and constant reminder of what Sam's life had been when Amanda lived.

Sam walked the street that night until twelve. About half the people he met were friendly, some of the others were indifferent, and a small percentage were definitely if cautiously antagonistic. All of them respected the gun Sam wore and the man he was.

For several days, things went along smoothly. Not that one person approached him for help, but Sam seemed to be accepted and tolerated.

Louise was happily satisfied, Jason was everlastingly filled with questions and evident disappointment that Sam hadn't run into any more troublesome characters. He invariably slept until midnight, but awoke in time to greet Sam and keep him up another hour or two until Sam began to feel his loss of sleep and the overwork which came from putting in many hours every day on his ranch and from six until each midnight in town, making his endless patrols.

A dozen times he was on the verge of quitting, but then, as he sat in solitary loneliness in the marshal's office, he became aware that Winter Gap actually had tamed down. He couldn't recall the last bad fight. The small arguments, the wild, harmless flailing of fists, amused everyone and were no hazard to the townspeople so Sam never interfered. He did recall that there hadn't been a gunshot inside the town limits for more than two weeks.

Women were appearing on the streets after dark now, and Mrs. Loomis, who ran the millinery, was staying open later. The sidewalks were mended and swept and Sam had little

trouble in convincing several merchants to fill in the road ruts and level and pack down the dirt before their stores, so the street wouldn't be the usual muddy mess when it rained.

As he walked down the street this night, Sam felt a keen sense of satisfaction. He wasn't accepted, but his work was showing results and there had to be some folks in town who noticed it. He was quite certain of this from the simple fact that he was greeted in much more friendly fashion than he had been even a week ago.

Still, it was too good to last and this was the night the peace and quiet were broken. Two trail hands, bone dry from many days on a cattle drive, rode into town with five months' pay and the determination to spend it.

An hour after they arrived, they were engaged in a wild fight which carried them all over the Gold Eagle Saloon and finally through the batwings to the street where there was more room for action. What they fought over, no one seemed to know, but it was serious enough that they were about to shoot it out.

Sam stepped between them, and he suddenly knew he was contending with a different breed of man than the kind that grew in Winter Gap. These riders were tough and rough, used to fighting, used to death, with little to look forward to, yet filled with a senseless pride they'd die to defend.

"All right, boys," Sam said, "you had your fun. Now simmer down."

They turned on Sam as he knew they would. They'd fight to the death among themselves and instantly join forces when one of their number was threatened. They both were tied down guns and they were in a perfect mood to use them.

Sam said, "Hold it now. I can see both of you are raring to go, but I'm warning you to take it easy."

One puncher glanced at the other and smiled. "I don't hanker to take it easy right now. You feel the same?"

The other agreed. "Sure puts me on the prod, him spoilin' our fun this way."

Sam didn't wait for them to draw. He knew they would and if he delayed he'd be a dead man in seconds. He drew with his old fluid speed and action, the gun coming up as he triggered it. His bullet smashed through the forearm of one man, taking him out of the fight at once. The other had his gun drawn, but not quite raised.

"I'd hate to do it," Sam said, "but my next one goes through your head."

The trail hand let his gun drop to the dirt. Sam made him move back, scooped it up, walked to the wounded man and took his gun away. Then he sent for Doc Evans and marched his two prisoners to the jail between the rows of silent on-lookers.

He locked up the unwounded man, applied first aid to the injured puncher and made him as comfortable as possible.

"You draw like a man who lives by his gun, Marshal. We figured this town didn't have any law, but we were sure wrong."

"You were," Sam said curtly.

"I ain't sore, Marshal. I had this comin' and so did Pete, you got locked up in here. We were a little ringy, I guess. The saloonkeeper gave us plenty of drink and didn't charge us for half of it."

"He's a very generous man," Sam said. "What were you two fighting over, anyhow?"

The trail hand looked over his shoulder. "Hey, Pete, what was the argument about?"

"How fast you could break a wild horse."

"Oh . . . yes, that's right. Funny thing, neither of us are bronc-busters. We're just plain trail hands."

From his cell, Pete said, "The saloonkeeper told me you said to him on the sly that I couldn't break a milk cow. I was ridin' on that free redeye and the way I saw it, nobody was better'n me in anythin'. So we started arguin' and one brag led to another and pretty soon we were swingin'."

"You're friends now?" Sam asked.

"Always were, Marshal. Heck, Jud an' me, we been ridin' together for years."

"Soon as the doctor gets here and fixes Jud up, both of you can go. Ride straight out."

"We will. Thanks, Marshal. I had me an idea we were goin' to spend a little time in your jail."

"Not this time. You're welcome back here any time, and so is all your outfit, but no wild drinking, no fighting and no shooting."

"It's your town," Pete said.

"Well, I wouldn't say that, boys. The whole idea was to get you two into a fight and make me take a hand. If you'd killed

me, that would have been fine. If I'd killed one of you, I'd be in trouble. We're all lucky, so we won't push that luck any. All right?"

"Suits me," Jud said. "I'll even ride on without waitin' for the doc if you say so, Marshal."

"No. That arm's got to be taken care of, and then a saloonkeeper's got to be taken care of."

"What I can't get through my head, Marshal, is why anybody'd want to get you in trouble. You were appointed Marshal here. If they didn't like you, why'd they give you the job?"

"The fact is, boys," Sam said with a grin, "I appointed myself. They tell me I haven't any authority to make an arrest or hold anyone in jail."

From the cell, Pete said, in wonder, "Why, say, that means we could walk out of here."

"That's right," Sam said. "Want to try?"

Jud laughed. "I got to wait for the doc. But Pete, here, might like to go."

"Never been in such a comfortable place in my life," Pete said quickly.

"All right, boys," Sam said. "I had you pegged wrong. Now that you tell me you were given all the whiskey you could drink and egged into a fight that would draw me in to stop it, I know we've all been fooled."

Sam unlocked the cell door. Pete came out and accepted his gun. Sam waited with them until Doc Evans finally appeared and dressed the arm. Then Sam watched them ride away. Doc Evans stood at his side.

"There'll be a next time and a next," he warned. "They're bound to kill you finally, Sam."

"At least I've accomplished something."

"You've done more than you realize, though you couldn't get me to admit that in public. The people who stand to make money from the wild ones don't like what you've done, and the idea of making this a real town with taxes and officials, runs against their grain. Hank Forbes acts like he's mayor, but if there was a vote, I don't think he'd get more than six. The same for the others who seem to set themselves up."

"They can't get away with it forever," Sam said. "Even if I'm in the same boat, seeing I appointed myself, too."

"But there's a difference, Sam. You don't stand to make any profit out of what you're doing. Most of the folks around

here know that. There's talk, but nobody's ready to stand up to Hank Forbes and the others."

"How long before they come to their senses, Doc?"

Evans shrugged. "Who can tell? Takes a while -unless something happens to bring it to a head. There are a few things about this I don't like, though. The way you're leaving Jason alone on the ranch is one of them."

"He's doing fine, Doc."

"Yes, I suppose he is, from your viewpoint. But he isn't coming into town, is he? Of course not, and he needs to be cured of that fear, Sam."

"Doc, that's one of the big reasons I'm acting like a lawman. To make him know the town is safe."

"Maybe you're right, but Jason needs your company more than during the day's working hours. We'll see. Meantime, watch yourself."

Sam said, "I aim to do a lot more'n that, Doc."

TWELVE

THE Gold Eagle was enjoying its usual fine business when Sam walked in. The bartenders gave him nervous glances as he went straight to the office of Charlie Mooregrove, the saloon owner.

Charlie was one of Winter Gap's upstanding citizens. He lived a decorous life. He prided himself on the way his saloon was operated and he appreciated his position of prominence in town affairs. He rarely drank and he was lean and hard for a man who did little physical work. Charlie was looked upon as a highly successful man, and he liked it that way.

Sam sat down beside Charlie's roll-top desk. "I think, by the silence you greeted me with, Charlie, you know why I'm here."

"Sam," Charlie said, "I like you. Men of your industrious ways and ambition will make something of this town. I'm real sorry for what happened to Amanda. Like everybody else, I sympathize with your motives in appointing yourself marshal, but it just won't work, Sam."

"It is working," Sam said. "Just a little while ago, I stopped what could have been a wild shooting match in the street. Just the kind that sometimes kills people."

"I heard about it," Charlie admitted.

"You engineered it," Sam said softly.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Sam. How would I have anything to do with a cheap gunfight—and more than that, why?"

"How? By telling your barkeeps to feed a couple of tough trail riders so much rotgut whiskey they were bound to start an argument. Especially if your barkeeps talked them into it."

Charlie opened his mouth to protest. Sam held up a big hand.

"Now you hear me out, Charlie. That was how you got involved. You did it because you wanted me mixed up in the fight, too. I won't go so far as to say you would have liked to see me killed in that battle—though I don't think you'd drown in your tears if that happened. What was more likely on your mind was the idea that if I killed one or both of those ringy fools, that would make folks say I had to give up this badge. They'd say that I'd turned back to my old days as a gunfighter. But it didn't work that way. It was your scheme, hatched by you to protect the interests this saloon represents to you. But you lost, Charlie, and losers have to pay."

"Sam, you've let the death of your wife affect the way you think. You're letting an accident . . ."

"An accident! Charlie—would a thing like that happen in Denver? In San Francisco, in St. Louis? Or even in the next town north of here where there's a marshal? You know it wouldn't. It happened here because there's nobody to stop trigger-happy idiots. And don't call it an accident."

"You have no right to wear that star and you know it, Sam."

"I'm closing you up for two weeks. If it happens again, I'll close you up for good."

Charlie's laugh bellowed through the room. "Sam, you sure get crazy ideas. How do you aim to close me up? Board the door?"

"If you open tomorrow night," Sam said, "I'll show you. I mean it, Charlie. I'm taking this whole thing seriously. Maybe the town ain't, but they'll come around to it. And I'm staying as marshal until a regular one is appointed—and paid a salary. That's about all. I'll come by tomorrow evening. Make

sure the door is locked and there's a sign on it saying you'll be open in two weeks' time."

Sam walked out without even glancing toward the bar, and returned to his office. He was in for it now. He'd laid it on the line and if they called him, he would have to take action. By this time, Charlie would have sent for Judge Glover, Hank Forbes, other merchants and all the saloon owners. Not one of them could afford to stand aside now.

In a way, Sam was glad he'd called them. If they were able to stop him, it was better that happened now before he wasted any more time. All these people of Winter Gap who made money from the free-spending, wild and reckless cowboys and trail hands were now his enemies. He was trying to ruin what had been a good thing for them and they were going to fight him.

All he hoped was that enough people of Winter Gap realized what he was trying to do and would back him. He walked the streets again until just before midnight, hoping that he might be stopped and maybe have his hand shaken by some grateful citizen. He was treated politely by all he met, but certainly not with any great measure of friendship and absolutely none of gratitude.

He didn't tell Jason about it when he got home. He merely said things were quiet in town, and then he steered Jason into talking about the ranch. He'd been treating Jason on almost an adult basis and, remarkably enough, Jason was acting like an adult. Sam was as proud of him as he was of the ranch they were shaping into something big and important.

But the next morning, Sunday, Jason knew things weren't going too well in town. Louise rode out. She refused to open her shop on that day, but she'd brought a batch of Jason's favorite cookies. After she greeted them, she placed a pot of fresh coffee on the stove.

"Charlie Mooregrove's place is open," she said.

"I expected that," Sam nodded.

"Everyone knows you threatened to close him up and they're wondering what you're going to do about it."

"What do you think I should do?" he asked.

"Close him up!"

"That was my intention. I didn't tell Jase about this and I guess maybe I better." He turned to his son. "There was a shooting in town last night, Jase. I stopped it and nobody got hurt much, but Charlie Mooregrove set the thing up."

"To embarrass your father," Louise added.

"So I told Charlie I was closing up his saloon because he let men get drunk and talked them into making trouble. That's what this is all about, Jase."

"I guess you have to close him up then, Pa."

"Guess I do."

"Sam," Louise said, "more and more people are approving of what you've done."

"Why don't they say so? Is everybody in Winter Gap bashful?"

"They're not sure which way to jump. They respect you, but they've been taking orders from Forbes and the others so long that they still respect them too, but not with the trust they have in you."

"I guess that's pretty good," Jason nodded sagely.

"It's wonderful, Jase," Louise said. "You can be very proud of Sam."

"Pa," Jase said earnestly, "you don't have to worry about the ranch. I can do pretty good with it and I'll try real hard."

"You've done fine, Jase, but it can't go on like this forever. We got a ranch to run and when it comes roundup time, branding time, selling time, I just won't be able to act like a marshal in town."

"Perhaps by that time folks will realize how important it is to have a marshal."

"They'd better, if they really want one," Sam said. "I'd keep on with it, Louise, because of what happened to Amanda and to—" He stopped short and glanced at Jason.

The boy worried his underlip for a moment and then he nodded. "You're thinking about how I feel, Pa. How I'm scared to go into town."

Louise quickly went to the boy's side and put an arm around his shoulders. "Jase, nobody thinks badly of you for that."

"I guess maybe they don't. I'm kinda ashamed of myself, but not as if I'd done something bad. And I ain't scared. I—just get sick to my stomach and I start thinking of—of—all that happened, I guess . . ."

"Long as you can face it and talk about it," Sam said, "there's nothing to worry about. But like anybody else, Jase has a right to go into town without being afraid of some crazy galoot shooting him down."

"To tell you the truth," Louise said frankly, "I was so

scared of all the violence. I often thought about moving somewhere else. But it has changed, Sam. You can tell that. I think we'll win everybody over yet."

But the doubt was still in Sam's voice. "So far I haven't done much to stop anybody, but when I got a little mad and gave Charlie Mooregrove a time to close or I'd close him, then I began looking for real trouble. Charlie's place is the most popular in town. His customers won't like it any more than Charlie will."

"But you're going through with it?" Louise asked.

"I have to. Either that or give up the whole thing and I'm not quite ready to do that yet. One thing, folks have stopped laughing at me. There's some improvement, but it'll be worse than being laughed at when they start hating me."

Louise gathered up the dishes and went to the sink. She let Jason pump water and while it heated, she kept busy cleaning the sink and the table.

Jase had chickens to feed and other chores so he went out to attend to them. Sam watched Louise for a few moments and then he began helping her. They stood side by side as she washed the dishes and he dried them. Their activities brought their bodies into actual contact several times. Both had grown silent quite suddenly. Louise found nothing to chatter about and Sam was wondering how he might express his feelings to this girl.

He cleared his mind of the problem and began to whistle cheerfully. After a while, Louise began to hum the song he whistled and then the dishes were done, the house straightened to her satisfaction, and Louise was ready to ride back.

At the door, she stopped and faced him. "Sam, something almost happened today between us. You know what I mean. I never was one to pick and choose my words. It wouldn't take much to make me fall in love with you. I know the time isn't right. Amanda is too fresh in your memory, and in mine. In Jason's as well, but that's how I feel."

"I know. Even while I had Amanda, I liked you, Louise. Amanda knew it and she liked you, too. So—I don't think it would be any insult to her memory if I courted you. But, like you say, it's maybe too soon. For all of us."

"Thank you, Sam," she said. Then she impulsively placed her cheek against his, before she pushed the door open and hurried out to where Jason was holding her horse. She hugged him and he squirmed in boyish embarrassment but showed he

liked it, anyway. Then he joined his father and the, watched Louise ride away, waving to her when she turned in the saddle and raised her hand.

"She sure rides good for a woman," Jason commented.

"Sure does," Sam agreed.

"How old is she, Pa?"

"Why, I don't rightly know. Younger than your ma was, I guess. Maybe she's twenty."

Jason nodded. "How old are you, Pa?"

"Thirty-one," he said promptly. "I'm an old geezer."

"Reckon so," Jason said. "Maybe you're too old for some body like Louise, huh?"

"Well now, I don't see why," Sam said in quick defense. Then he frowned darkly. "What are you getting at, Jase?"

"I think I'd like having her around, Pa."

"Yes," Sam said. "You'd get so danged fat you'd bust. You like her baking, that's what you like. Now we'll stop talking about Louise. It's time for me to go into town."

Jason looked up at him, refusing to change the subject. "Ma liked her too, didn't she? I remember Ma always speaking well of Louise. I know Ma wouldn't mind."

Sam had to get him off the subject, and he knew how to make Jason forget Louise quickly.

"While I'm getting into my best pants and shirt, you fetch my shotgun. The sawed-off one—and lay out shells. Spread shot, heavy load."

"You aiming to use the scattergun?" Jase asked in awe.

"Not really against folks. I'll just wave it around a little. Shotguns have a quieting effect on ornery folks, and I got a notion there'll be quite a few of them in Winter Gap tonight."

THIRTEEN

THE short-barreled shotgun nestled comfortably under Sam's arm as he walked into the Gold Eagle shortly after eight o'clock that night. The tables were about half full, the bar was lined two-deep and an extra bartender was on duty.

Sam's challenge had been talked up all over town and he

knew that by now there would also be a crowd in the street outside the saloon. Sam walked to the far end of the bar and laid the shotgun across it.

"Drink up, folks," he said loudly. "What you already ordered you can drink, but in twenty minutes the door closes and stays shut for two weeks."

Charlie Mooregrove came out of his office and took up a stand at the other end of the long bar.

"Now don't be a fool, Sam," he called.

"I told you I'd close you up if you didn't close yourself," Sam called back. "What happens next is up to you, Charlie."

"I'm not closing and you won't close me up," Charlie said. "I think everybody's had about enough of this foolishness. You're no marshal, Sam. If you do any shooting, you're as liable to arrest as anyone here."

"Likely I am," Sam said, "but as I've mentioned before, who's going to arrest me?"

"We'll see that you're locked up," Charlie promised.

"But then you're acting as marshal and nobody appointed you, either, Charlie. So if you try to make trouble for me, you'd better do it with a gun in your hand. Anything short of that just won't work."

"All right, Sam. With a gun then."

Sam picked up the shotgun. "In that case there's no sense waiting. Everybody away from the bar."

Some moved, some didn't. Sam aimed the shotgun at the back bar and let go with one barrel. The shells were filled with heavy pellets which scattered wide. He broke half the bottles on the shelves, smashed the mirror, peppered the oil painting of the reclining nude, sent the bartenders diving for the floor and drove everyone, including Charlie, well away from the bar.

Sam drew his sixgun, placed it before him. Then he reached into his pocket, took out more shells. He broke the shotgun, worried out the spent shell, inserted a new one and let go again. More of the bottles and mirror were smashed.

"Stop that!" Charlie yelled. "Stop it, Sam! You've gone loco! Stop it!"

"You can lock up your place any time. Until you do, I'll just keep firing off this shotgun," Sam said. "And if you mean to arrest me, go ahead, Charlie. That goes for anybody, but I'll pick up my gun the minute somebody makes a move."

Sam raised the ten-gauge. Charlie waved his arms high

over his head. "All right! All right! You'll get that chandelier next and it cost me a fortune. Folks, I'm closing up. I don't want anybody killed. We'll take care of Sam later, but you can't reason with a crazy man. Everybody out . . ."

There weren't many left inside and, with their courage no longer challenged, they promptly fled. The bartenders threw their aprons over the bar, picked their way over broken glass, fetched their hats and coats and departed. Charlie ordered one of them back to lock the rear door.

Sam slipped the sixgun into its holster, thrust the shotgun under his arm and walked up to Charlie.

"You didn't have to make me do it this way, Charlie. You know me well enough to be sure that when I say something I mean it. Now you leave the door locked for two weeks. If you don't, I'll come back and shoot up the place again. Nothing personal in this." Sam smiled. "I'll still drink your whiskey when I'm not on duty."

"You'll get no service in here," Charlie said venomously. "What's more, we're going to get rid of you, Sam. Whatever pity we felt for you is gone now. We're dealing with a crazy man who thinks he can appoint himself marshal and shoot up the town. That ain't so and you're going to find it out."

"Any time, Charlie," Sam said. "I'll either be in my office or patrolling the street. Good night."

Sam walked out as casually as if nothing had happened. The crowd silently gave way, and Sam felt as alone as if he were a hundred miles in the middle of the desert.

Back in his office, he sat down wearily and wondered how much longer he could get away with this. After tonight, the saloonkeepers and merchants were going to consider him their enemy and act accordingly. They were not in the most favorable position in the world, however, and he was thinking about that when Louise walked in.

"Glad you dropped by," he greeted her and carried a chair over beside his own at the desk. "I've been feeling lonesome."

"You stirred them up tonight," Louise said.

"Meant to. I started it, but finishing it won't be as easy."

"What do you think they'll do, Sam? Men like Forbes and Mooregrove and the others?"

"Well," Sam said slowly, "they won't just walk up and shoot me because I won't stand hitched and they know that. You

see, the men who make money off wild trail hands and ranchers also have to depend for a living on the quiet folks in town. If they try to shoot me, the town folks won't like it—I hope."

"I can swear they won't. Sam, the women especially, are all for you."

"That's fine, but women can't vote. What I need is the backing of voters."

"Do you think they'll hire someone to kill you?"

"Might. Take a good man though, and they come high. Also, if the man they hire knows about me, he'll charge that much more. I'm good with a gun, Louise. Maybe that ain't something to be proud of, but it's handy."

"But that won't help if they agree to shoot you in the back, Sam."

"I also have some experience in that line. I know the signs. I know the men who'd do the job. Only thing I don't like is that I'll have to do some shooting myself, and that's just what I'm trying to put a stop to. Danged fools won't let me."

"I'm working for you, Sam," she said earnestly. "I talk to as many women as I can and they talk to their husbands. I've got many of them convinced it's worth paying taxes to make the town respectable and safe. I keep telling them it has to happen someday, so why should we wait and perhaps have more innocent folks killed like Amanda was? You can't argue away a sensible approach, Sam."

"Trouble is, there's not much time. I'm dog-tired these days and when my ranch needs more work, the ranch comes first every time."

"I know. And I have a little bad news for you. That's why I came over. Hank Forbes's son is coming back."

Sam shrugged. "Wayne Forbes? He's a kid—a runny-nosed kid."

Louise shook her head. "Not any more. His mother's been worried about him for a long time. He's been in Laramie, riding high with a wild bunch. He's learned how to shoot and drink his whiskey and he's mean as sin."

"Maybe thinks he's a mite faster'n the next man with a gun?"

"I don't know. Most of his kind usually do. He's never worked. Hank keeps sending him money. From what his mother tells me, Wayne's turned out to be pretty bad."

Sam thought about it for a moment. "I wonder if Hank sent for the boy to use him against me."

"I've been worried about that, too. But he'll be here soon."

"I don't think Hank is fool enough to put his twenty-year-old kid up against me. No matter how good Wayne is with a gun, I can't see Hank risking his son's life that way. Because if he comes for me, Louise, I'll have to kill him. That'll be the end of me as marshal, maybe as a rancher in these parts, but I won't stand there and let some half-baked kid just mosey along and cut me down."

"Maybe it was all a mistake. Even my father becoming marshal. Look what it got him." She drew the shawl she was wearing more snugly around her shoulders and got up. "I'll leave a bag of cookies just outside the door for Jase," she said.

"You're treating that boy too well, Louise."

"I'm trying to make him like me very much, Sam."

"You don't have to try. He already does and he said so."

She drew in a sharp breath. "Oh, Sam, he did not."

"Sure—right after you left today. He asked me how old you were and how old I was, and mentioned that Amanda liked you very much. His mind is working. You can almost watch it."

She smiled then. "I'll put half a cake in the bag too. Mind you, don't ride home without it."

"I won't—and thanks. Think I'll head back early, myself. Liable to be quiet in town tonight. Keep working on the womenfolk, Louise. It helps."

She stepped out of the office and he followed her to the sidewalk. There were a few people on the street, but an air of quiet and peace seemed to have descended on Winter Gap. The area around the Gold Eagle was strangely dark and the hitchrack out front didn't have a horse tied to it.

"I do like this town, Sam," she said softly. "I want to live and die here. Have children here and teach them to help the town grow. There's everything here that God gave our earth. Good soil, trees, and grass enough for all the cattle in the world. This is country to grow in, Sam. To grow children in, too. By the time Jase becomes a man, he'll have so much to pass on."

Sam nodded. "You're right in everything you say. It's too bad this has to be spoiled by a few greedy men, but that's how it's always been."

He rode back just after ten o'clock because he was tired.

There was work to be done on the ranch books which he'd neglected for so long now, and there were repairs to be made around the house and the barn. He felt as if he'd frittered away too many nights in town. If the townspeople didn't arrange for a lawman soon, they probably never would until the town grew too big for its britches. Sam didn't intend to go on enforcing the law illegally until that time came. He doubted he'd even live through it.

Jase was surprised to see him so early, but he jumped out of bed and joined him in the kitchen for coffee. Sam thought he might even get used to that sometimes bitter, sometimes wishy-washy stuff Jason called coffee, if he lived long enough.

They ate Louise's pastry and he told Jason what he'd done. They turned in early because they had fence posts to replace the next day. Jason had been riding fence for two days and marking the bad posts. Sam wanted a look at his cattle, too, and at the whole spread. These days he felt as if someone else owned the ranch, not Sam Bishop.

It was a fine day and they got a great deal of hard work done. By nightfall, Sam was too tired to do more than eat.

"Tonight," he announced, "the marshal of Winter Gap is taking a night off."

"You reckon that'll be all right, Pa?" Jason asked.

"It'll have to be, seeing I don't get paid in anything but insults. I'm wore out, Jase. And it won't be any different tomorrow night."

"I dunno, Pa. Honest, the town might go crazy again if you don't show up."

"Let it. Might do some good. Make folks realize what I been giving them for nothing. Come on to bed, Jase. And if I don't make it, throw a blanket over me where I drop."

It seemed strange the next morning not to have been in town the night before and Sam found himself worrying about what might have happened. If it had been serious, Louise would have either ridden out or sent someone. He told himself he was an idiot for worrying this way. If no one else did, why should he?

By the time Jason was dressed and they had eaten a large breakfast so they wouldn't have to stop for dinner, Sam had ceased to concern himself about Winter Gap and turned his attention to his ranch.

They dug post holes and replaced more fence, rounded up a little jag of strayed steers and made a rough tally of

calves as they spotted them. Jason choused a wild horse out of some bush and chased him over the level country up into the hills. He returned, sheepish that his boyishness had got the best of him and he'd forgotten he was here to work. Sam rumbled his tousled hair.

"I been working you too hard, son. A boy needs time for play and fun. Maybe we could ride in . . ."

Jason turned his back on Sam abruptly. Sam sighed and touched the boy's shoulder. "Seems like I'm sorry again, Jase. It still bothers you—going into town?"

"Yes sir, it bothers me too much. I try to think that I'm growing up and I got to ride in some day, but it's no use. My stomach starts turning cartwheels every time I think of riding down that damn street."

"You're starting to swear some, too," Sam noted. "Nothing's right for you, Jase. It just ain't proper for a man to bring up a boy all by himself. But—that's how it's got to be."

"For now," Jason added wisely.

Sam laughed. "All right for now. Tell me, if Winter Gap stopped having shoot-outs, wildness and crazy fights, would that make a difference?"

"I think so, Pa. I ain't sure, but if there was nothing in Winter Gap to be afraid of, then I guess there'd be no reason why I couldn't ride in without getting sick. Honest, Pa, I don't think that I'm a coward—it's something else. I can't tell you what, but it's there and it won't leave."

"You're no coward," Sam said earnestly. "Anything but that, Jase. You went through something that was bad for a boy your age to have to see and be a part of. It will go away. I'll make it go away by turning Winter Gap into the most peaceful town you ever saw. Then you'll ride in and everything will be fine. Just don't think of yourself as yellow. That's not it, and you can ask Louise and Doc Evans if you don't believe me."

"Heck, I believe you, Pa. You going in tonight?"

"We'll head for home now and have supper," Sam said. "I'm ready to eat out the pantry. How about you?"

"I been hungry since noontime. If you ride in tonight, I'll clean up."

They were finishing what was left of Louise's baked goods. Sam made up his mind then.

"I'm not going into town tonight, Jase. I want to see if what I've tried to do there has done any good. This is a pretty

good test. Tomorrow I'll ride in. If there's been no fights or shoot-outs, maybe I have quieted things down some. And anyway, I'm only fit to sleep tonight. If I started to draw on anybody, I wouldn't clear my gun until daybreak. But you can clean up, anyway. I won't deprive you of that much fun."

Sam was in bed twenty minutes later and asleep in seconds. He awoke just before dawn and lay there quietly, giving Jason a while longer to rest. Soon he'd have to send Jason to school. That meant he would have to ride into Winter Gap. Therefore, the town had to be quieted down and kept that way by a legally appointed lawman. Sam's problem was as easy as that to settle. Without law and order Jason wouldn't be able to ride in. Without an education the boy would lose too much in life. Sam knew he had to go back to town and maintain order until the people decided he was right and did something about it. Already Jason had lost too much time from his schooling.

In the fall, Jason would have to go back. If he couldn't, then there was only one thing left for Sam to do—move on. Let the ranch go, forget the work he'd put into it, forget Louise, forget the grave on the hilltop. He suddenly realized that if not another soul benefited from his work as an illegal marshal, he and Jason would. And that made it worthwhile.

Sam and Jason worked around the barn and the house, getting things in as good order as possible. They had an early supper and Jason stood outside the door, watching his father ride to town. Then Jason walked back inside. He was proud. He showed it. Sam would have been very pleased by the look on Jason's face.

FOURTEEN

THE first thing Sam heard was the wild noises coming from the Gold Eagle. Mooregrove had opened up again. Sam's mouth tightened and he was glad he'd brought along the shotgun. He dismounted at the head of the street, walked his horse to the livery stable and silently turned him over to the man in charge. Then Sam tucked the shotgun under his arm

again and walked slowly down the street toward the Gold Eagle.

He stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, aimed the shotgun at the top of the saloon window and fired a barrel. The glass shattered, the shouting and laughing stopped as if cut off. After a few moments someone looked out over the batwings and ducked back inside quickly. The next person to show was Charlie Mooregrove and he was wearing a gun.

Sam waited for him. Charlie walked up to about ten paces of Sam and stopped.

"So you're back," he said acidly.

"And you're open."

"I aim to stay open. What do you think of that, Sam?"

"I think it's going to cost you more than you'll take in, Charlie."

"Now see here, I'm not going to just stand aside and let you wreck my place."

"Then lock the door for two weeks and it begins again today, Charlie. Two weeks from today, you can open up."

"No!" Charlie shouted.

Sam merely pointed the shotgun to one side and blew out the second window, aiming high so no one would be hurt. Charlie shouted a wild curse and his hand moved toward his gun.

"Don't, Charlie," Sam begged. "I can beat you six ways to Sunday. Pulling a gun'll get you nothing but a lot of pain."

"Well, why'd you stay away then, if you meant to make closing me up stick? You ain't been here for two nights . . ."

"Even an unpaid marshal gets a little time off," Sam said. "You knew damned well I'd be back. Are you going to close up, Charlie?"

"Why don't you do something about the shooting last night? Why pick on me? I just run a saloon where a man can have a little fun when his work is done. I don't hunt a man down and shoot him."

"What shooting?" Sam asked.

"You'd been here, maybe—" Charlie broke off, realizing what he was saying was in direct conflict with his prior opinions. "It was Hank Forbes' boy. You remember Wayne. He was wild when he was fifteen."

"I remember him. Somebody shoot him?"

"That boy's fast, Sam. He's faster'n anybody I seen in action lately—and he knows it. Wayne shot Angus Fleming."

"Angus? Why, he never riled anybody in his life."

"He riled Wayne."

Sam shook his head. "Charlie, can't you see now how badly a regular marshal is needed here? You began to say if I'd been in town it might not have happened. I agree with you—but I got a ranch to run. I can't be here all the time. When I am, not a living soul wants to help me. But it would take a mighty bone-headed man not to know a lawman could have stopped Wayne Forbes."

"The lawman would maybe have got shot up doing it," Charlie said.

"That's the chance a lawman takes. But he can't be expected to do it all alone. He needs to be appointed. He needs the good will of the town behind him, and maybe a few guns, too."

"Maybe . . . though I still say it's not yet time to have law here. But you been riding so high and mighty here these last few weeks, folks are wondering what you're aiming to do about young Wayne Forbes."

"I'm going to arrest him for murder."

"Angus ain't dead yet. He's at Doc Evans' office. Likely he'll die, though."

"Then I'll arrest Wayne for attempted murder and if Angus dies, I'll make it murder."

"Then what? After you arrest him?"

"I don't know. If he's tried by Frank Glover, it'll be only a joke. Frank will let him go. But it has to be done. What happens after I make the arrest, is up to the people of Winter Gap. As for you, Charlie—lock that door and board up the windows or I swear there won't be enough left of your saloon to give a lizard a drink."

Charlie nodded. "I think Wayne is better'n you with a six-gun. I think he'll kill you, Sam, and damned if I ain't hoping he will."

"It's possible," Sam said. "But if Wayne draws on me, I'll shoot back. You can tell him that when you find him, which I know you're about to do. I'll see Angus first and get his story. Then I'll listen to Wayne if he wants it that way, or I'll face him!"

"I'll have Wayne here—right in front of my place."

"Save me a lot of trouble, Charlie. I'm grateful for the favor."

Sam walked away. He knew that everyone in Winter Gap

was watching him. He refused to think about Jason or Louise, or anything except the fact that he was going to make an arrest soon and he was prepared to accept the trouble that would go with it.

Doc Evans was tilted back in his swivel chair, feet on his roll-top desk and he was sound asleep, hands clasped over his pot belly. He came awake instantly as Sam closed the door.

"Been expecting you," Doc said. "All idiots and fools wind up in this office one time or another. Why would you be different?"

"How's Angus?"

"I did what I could for him. Took the bullet out of his gut, but not the one in his chest."

"He was hit twice?"

"Wayne called his shots and placed them."

"All right," Sam said sharply, "I've done that myself, years back. What was the fight about?"

"Before Wayne rode home, Hank Forbes told Charlie you had no right to keep the Gold Eagle closed, and Charlie ought to get up enough spunk to open the place. So Charlie did and Wayne was one of his first customers."

"Hank sent that fool kid to get drunk?"

"That I can't say. He certainly didn't stop him. Maybe he couldn't if he tried. Wayne's turned into a real *malo hombre*. He's likely had some luck in gunfights and he thinks he can't be beat."

"Cemeteries all over are full of people like him, Doc."

"Full of people like you who try to stop them, too. Well, let's say Hank sent Wayne. If he did, it was to put Wayne right up against you. That means Hank's got a lot of confidence in Wayne's ability with a gun. He is the boy's father, you remember."

"So Angus got mixed up in something?"

"I dunno, Sam. Maybe I shouldn't tell you."

"You don't, others will, Doc. I'd rather it came from you because you'll put it square on the line."

"Well, Wayne was bragging what he'd do if you showed up. You didn't and he got bragging louder and harder. Angus said that he guessed maybe you were right and we needed a lawman around here to shut up ranting fools like Wayne."

"Was Angus armed?"

"Oh sure, he wore a gun. I don't think he'd shot it in two years. Wayne told him to reach. Angus had a skinful, too,

and he was game enough to try. Wayne said he'd put one in his gut and another through his heart. He was right about the stomach, but he missed the heart by an inch. Not that it makes any difference. Angus won't live."

"Did Angus clear his gun?"

"Yes."

"You got it here?"

Doc motioned toward a table against the wall. The gun, belt, holster and all, lay there. Sam had trouble getting the gun out of its ancient, dry holster. He sniffed of the muzzle, checked the cartridges.

"He didn't fire it," Sam said.

"That's right."

"I want to see Angus, Doc."

"You sure can't do him any harm," Doc said. He led the way to the back room where he kept a bed and an examination table. Angus lay on the table. A blanket covered him to the neck. The blanket wasn't moving.

"Nothing can harm him," Doc said. He pulled down the blanket and placed his ear against the bared chest. Then he straightened. "He'd dead, Sam."

Sam was looking at the naked body. "I see the stomach wound, that's all."

Doc moved the body. The second wound was through the back.

Sam's grim face was indication enough of how he felt. Doc covered the dead man and led the way back to the office.

"Angus was still on his feet after the first shot and he had turned away. Wayne said he promised to put one through his heart so he tried to."

"By shooting him through the back after he was already dying on his feet?"

"That's about it."

"Angus wasn't a trouble-maker. He had a little farm and he was an asset to this town. Wayne ain't worth the breath he has to take every few seconds. So we lose a good man like Angus and gain a citizen like Wayne. I say we don't, Doc. I say it's bad enough to lose Angus and it's too late to do anything about that, but we can sure do something about Wayne. And I aim to."

"He's fast, Sam. I'm warning you."

"Fast against Angus. Let's see how fast he is against me, Doc."

"I'll soon find out," Doc said in a discouraged voice. "I'm the one who always finds out, Sam. Good luck."

Sam left the shotgun with Doc and walked out. Wayne would be waiting in front of the Gold Eagle. If Wayne got away with this, any hope for law and order would be gone from Winter Gap for years. Wayne would strut and bray his challenges. This was the showdown Sam knew would some day come to him. There might be more if he won this one, but he'd gone far enough so that there was now no turning back.

They were waiting for him, half the town was there, the other half gathered behind doors and windows. Sam didn't look for Louise. He prayed she'd stay indoors and not witness the fight because Sam realized very well that he was now about to revert to his old way of life, when he lived—or died—by his gun.

There was a difference, however, and a significant one. This time he wouldn't be shooting for the sheer hell of it. This time he was doing it for the memory of Amanda, and the future of Jason, his son. These thoughts kept him icy calm and he moved with a deceptive nonchalance.

Sam stopped in front of Hank Forbes. He glanced at Wayne, who stood apart from anyone else, about a dozen yards away. The boy was lean, hard as nails and snake-mean. It showed in his eyes and the tight line of his mouth.

Sam spoke quietly. "Hank, if you told that boy to stand up to me, you're a fool. If you let him kill Angus to get at me, you're also a murderer."

"I couldn't stop him, Sam. Not if I wanted to."

"But you don't want to. Is that how it stands, Hank?"

"Somebody has to do something about you."

"This is a fine way to do it, Hank. Getting Angus killed to satisfy your own selfish ends. I hoped you'd have enough sense to realize people here want law. You could fix it in a minute if you wanted to. Now they're pulling away from you. They know you're wrong. They'll side me, but now I have to do some killing to make that possible. It's your doing, Hank. It'll be your own son's blood on your hands."

"You can't take him," Forbes said coldly. "He's too young and quick. He's too good for you or any man."

Sam walked briskly up to where Wayne stood. Sam looked him over without trying to conceal his contempt. "I'm looking at myself now," Sam said. "I was just like you once,

Wayne. But I was luckier, because I never went up against a man better than I was. Maybe there wasn't anybody better. Maybe I just thought so, the way you're thinking now."

"**You talk one hell of a shoot-out, Sam,**" Wayne said.

"Yes—I talk a lot, Wayne. I'll say one thing more. You shot Angus in the back. That alone gets you no mercy. You're not much more'n a sniveling, droopy-pants kid who thinks he's tough and fast. All right, Wayne. Right now you're wearing a gun, you proved the blackness in your heart by killing Angus. So I have to kill you, Wayne. You're now a man in the light of your own eyes, so you'll have to die a man."

Sam reached. Wayne was in action, but Sam was first. He knew the split second of the start of the draw was the difference between a live gunman and a dead one. Only a fool gave his opponent the first chance.

When Wayne's fingers touched the butt of his gun, he was already looking into the muzzle of Sam's weapon that was leveled, the hammer thumbed back, finger on the trigger. Wayne's mouth hung agape and there was stark terror in his eyes.

"You'd have killed me," Sam said softly. "I can't let you live because you'll try again."

Wayne's mouth opened wider. "Ma!" he yelled. "Ma! Sam, don't kill me! Sam—please don't! I'll ride out. I don't want to die. Please, Sam. . . . I . . . I want my ma. I want Ma!"

Sam walked up to him, yanked his gun clear, slapped him across the face as hard as he could and knocked him to the ground. Then he holstered his gun, grasped Wayne by the collar and dragged him down the middle of the street to the marshal's office. Nobody got in his way. No one spoke a word.

Sam threw Wayne into a cell, slammed the door in place and locked it. Then he went over to the water bucket and had a dipper of stale water. He threw the empty dipper across the room and sat down to wait. He had no idea what for.

FIFTEEN

HANK FORBES came alone. He was a subdued, intensely angry man and he controlled himself only by exerting considerable effort. Sam wearily motioned him to sit down.

"I came here for my son," Hank said. "You unlock that door and turn him loose, Sam."

Sam sighed. "Hank, haven't you had enough?"

"You got no right to keep him locked up. I say you ain't a lawman, and if you don't let Wayne out, I'll bring in men who will."

"Hank," Sam said, "do you know what'll likely happen to Wayne? He drew against a man half-drunk and who barely knew which was the business end of a gun when he was sober. Wayne shot him and then fired again when Angus had his back turned. He was looking for a showdown with me and he got it. I could have killed him and not one soul in Winter Gap would have blamed me."

"You never gave him a chance."

"I gave him a better chance than he gave Angus. Face it, Hank; Wayne only thinks he's tough. Didn't you hear him yelling for his ma? You raised a fine son, you did. A stinking coward who turns yellow when he meets his match."

"For the last time, are you going to let him out?"

"No."

"All right. You brought this on yourself, Sam."

"Maybe I did, but you sure brought plenty on yourself, too. Hank, that boy of yours is liable to swing, did you ever realize that?"

There were sniveling noises from the cell. Hank paid no attention to them. He said, "My son isn't going to hang, he isn't going to jail. He'll soon be free and you'll be dead, Sam. That's what you're asking for. That's what you'll get."

"So long, Hank," Sam said quietly.

"I'll be back. Don't you worry about that. I'll be back."

Sam shrugged. "Hank, don't you want to talk to your boy?"

"Hell with him," Hank said angrily. "I'll tend to Wayne after I'm through with you."

He stormed out, slamming the door. Sam walked over to the cell and looked through the bars at Wayne, seated on the bunk with his knees drawn up to his chin.

"Your pa's up to something, Wayne. You know what it is?"

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't. Why should I tell you?"

"Just thought you'd come to your senses, some. Guess I was wrong. Wayne, who ever showed you how to handle a gun?"

"You'll find out," Wayne replied quickly.

"I thought so. Your pa's gone for some pals of yours, hasn't he? Somebody you been riding with. If your pals are no better with a gun than you are, Wayne, I won't lose any sleep."

"Wait'll you see," Wayne said. "You just wait and see, Sam. They can start digging your grave right now."

"I don't know," Sam said patiently. "Some people never get enough. Here you are, locked up with maybe a hangman's noose waiting and you talk about another killing. Maybe what I should have done was shoot you on the spot, Wayne."

"You were lucky," Wayne said. "You were just lucky."

Sam nodded. "I got your gun in my desk. I'll open the cell, give you the gun and we'll step outside to the street and try it all over again. That suit you?"

"You're nothing but a killer," Wayne shouted. "Just a cheap gunfighter."

"I never shot a man in the back in my life, Wayne. I never crawfished. I never yelled for my ma to help me. And if I ever was beaten fair and square, I'd stand up and take what was coming to me. Now, I got no idea what your pa is going to do. I expect he's important enough to get you off, seeing we have no judge or court or anything else here. If that happens, son, you ride just as far as you can and forget there ever was such a place as Winter Gap. Because, so help me, if I ever see you outside this cell again, I'll kill you where you stand. I guess you know how I feel now."

Sam returned to his desk. Ten minutes went by before Louise came in with Emmie Forbes. Wayne's mother was red-eyed from her tears and she went directly to the cell. Wayne pushed himself against the wall and kept his head lowered.

"Thank you for not killing him, Sam," Louise said.

Sam smiled. "Louise, you didn't think I'd gun him, did you?"

"He'd have killed you."

"Not a chance. There wasn't even any competition. Tell me, how's the town taking it?"

"There's talk of stringing Wayne up. Doc Evans has been going around telling just how Angus died. It was a terrible thing, Sam. A boy like Wayne, so ruthless and merciless."

Emmie Forbes got no response from her son. She went over to the desk. "I'll be beholden to you the rest of my days, Sam. He would have killed you, but you spared him. He's not much good and he never will be, but he is my son."

"Emmie," Sam said, "I used to be like him. Just the same, I understand the boy. Right now, he's ashamed of himself and he's scared. He's had his pride rubbed in the dirt."

"Will they hang him, Sam?"

"Emmie, Angus was a well-liked man. But I've asked some questions. It's true that Wayne was looking for trouble last night, but Angus had been drinking, too. Angus knew what Wayne was like. He could have walked away from the fight. Wayne wouldn't've been dumb enough to shoot him then. Angus wore a gun, he made his play. The way Wayne killed him was bad. Yet—the bullet that hit Angus in the back wasn't the one that killed him. Now if I was to judge this case, I'd see that Wayne was punished, but I don't think I'd hang him."

"But you can't be sure what the town will do."

"No. However, I can promise you this: If they come for Wayne with a rope, they have to go through me."

Emmie looked back at the cell, glanced at Louise. Then she blurted out her story. "Hank's crazy-mad. Wayne rode in with three gunmen. They're camped a few miles out. Hank's gone for them. He's going to bring them in to kill you, Sam."

"Ma," Wayne cried out from the cell. "You shouldn't have told him."

Emmie walked back to the cell door. "You rode away better than a year ago and I worried myself sick over you, Wayne. You'll ride away again, if you're lucky. This time I won't worry. I don't want you to come back here. I never want to see you again. I wasted much of my life bringing you up, but I'll waste no more."

She hurried out. Louise sat down beside the desk.

"What's next, Sam?" she asked in a worried voice.

"Hank will bring in Wayne's three pardners. That's all."

"Sam, good as you are, you can't stand up to three of them."

"I expect to have some help, Louise."

"Help? From whom, Sam?"

"People who live here. It's time this whole thing came to a head. If they don't want me as marshal . . . don't want any law in Winter Gap—then it's time we found out for sure. If they don't side me, they don't care. And if that happens, neither do I."

"You'll be killed, Sam."

"I have to take that chance."

She shook her head vigorously in her despair. "I got you into this. It's my fault."

"No, that's not true. Somebody has to take a stand. I'm so blamed mad right now I'm not even scared. But I warn you, Louise, that if I face those three and nobody sides me, I'll fight for my life and I'll win if I can. If I live, I want nothing more to do with Winter Gap."

"I'll be at your side, Sam."

"Then we'll see what happens."

"What'll happen, you'll die," Wayne called from the cell.

"Shut up," Sam said, "or I'll gag you."

"Sam," Louise said, "couldn't we ask the governor for help?"

"With Hank, Charlie and all the others ready to speak up against me? The governor will remember me as a gunfighter, as a randy, hell-for-leather kid. He was a lawyer and later on county prosecutor where I did most of my hell-raising. Half the time he was saying what he'd do if he got me in jail. No—that's one hope we haven't got."

"We must do something. I won't let you shoot it out with three killers, Sam. Look—there's lots of time. We could go away. Ride back and pick up Jase . . ."

"What did you say?" Sam asked mildly.

She pressed a hand against her eyes. "Nothing. I didn't say anything, Sam. But—I'm near the end of my rope. I don't want you harmed. No matter what happens, I don't want that."

He took her hand between his two roughened ones. "Louise, we went into this, knowing there'd be trouble. I think folks know the good we've done now. I think they'll side me and there won't even be a fight. The gunfighters won't risk taking on a whole town. Everything is all right."

"I hope so. You're putting a lot of faith in these people."

"Don't you have it?"

"The women . . . yes, they'd back you up. The men swing too much to Hank Forbes and Charlie Mooregrove and the others. Most everybody owes them money, they've taken favors from them and expect to do favors in return. I'm not sure, Sam."

"Then it's high time we found out. Now you go back home. There's nothing to do but wait. This will work out."

"Sam . . ." She touched his face. "Sam, I—I—"

"It's all right," he said gently. "I know what I'm doing. Go now. Hank's liable to ride hard and bring them back in a hurry."

She left, but reluctantly and with many misgivings. Sam followed her to the street and looked around the town. People were gathered in small, tense groups, nobody moved about. He returned to his desk and checked his gun. Then he settled back to wait.

In the cell Wayne began to whistle, shrilly and with the intent of getting on Sam's nerves. Once Sam told him to stop and Wayne laughed at him. He started to whistle again. Sam picked up the bucket of water, unlocked the cell door, stepped inside and dumped the water over Wayne's head. He let him sputter and curse and then he pointed at the open door.

"You can walk out whenever you like."

Wayne stared at him. "You'll shoot me. You'll let me have it in the back."

"I'll give you your gun."

"I can't beat you. What're you trying to do, murder me?"

"Might be. You going or not?"

"You'll have to drag me out. I'll take my chances in here."

"Suit yourself," Sam said. "I'll leave the door open because I don't need a lock to keep you inside, Wayne. You're just naturally the yellowest man I ever met with."

Sam went back to the desk. He thought that somebody might come in to say he would be sided, but nobody did. Now and then he went to the window and peered out. The people were still on the street, still grouped, still talking and waiting.

Then, about an hour later, and still before midnight, he heard the hoofbeats and the sudden hush fall over the town. Sam put his watch in his pocket, pulled on his hat, touched the butt of his gun and walked out.

The trio stood shoulder to shoulder in front of the Gold

Eagle from which enough light emerged through the shattered windows to make the scene entirely visible. The man in the middle seemed familiar. As Sam walked closer, he recognized him, and all the horror of weeks ago came back with a savage fury.

It was Hodge Bundy, the man who had killed Amanda and then shot Sam. Hodge looked thinner, older. He stood stiff as a ramrod. Hank Forbes hurried up and joined Charlie Mooregrove. Sam stopped twenty feet from the trio. He didn't know the other two, but all the signs were there that these were deadly cold-blooded killers.

Sam estimated his chances and decided they were too small for comfort, but he made up his mind that the first man he'd get would be Hodge. His hatred flamed up again.

Sam said, "Well, here we are, folks." He looked around at the townspeople. "It's right on the line now. So far I've been able to handle things alone, but not any more. I need help. I've done my best to help you. It's time you stood up for me. It won't take very many to beat these three."

Nobody moved. The trio of killers weren't precisely certain what was going on, but they were enjoying the spectacle of their victim asking for help that was certainly not going to materialize.

"So I go it alone?" Sam asked loudly. "I've regarded all of you as my friends. I need your help. If I don't get it, I may be killed."

There wasn't a sound. Sam's face went dark with anger. "Not a damned one of you care. You don't want law and order here. You're afraid of Hank Forbes and Charlie Mooregrove—who haven't the guts to fight their own battles. You're afraid of crazy kids like Wayne. You're afraid of your own shadows. You're all yellow, and if that's how it is, then I don't want any help."

Some man—just one—in the background began to move forward. Another grasped his arm and the man stopped and then rooted himself to the spot.

Suddenly another man moved. It was Hodge Bundy. He kept his hands away from his two guns and he moved very carefully.

"You first, Hodge?" Sam asked. "That's more pleasure than I expected. It almost makes up for my disappointment with this town. Any time you like, Hodge."

Hodge suddenly swung around and drew his two guns. Sam

drew also, but he held his fire because Hodge was aiming his guns at the two outlaws who were regarding him as if he'd gone mad. Hodge backed up until he stood beside Sam.

"I'm cutting myself in," he said. "You and me, Sam, can handle this pair easy. After that, we'll see about us."

"Hodge, you gone loco?" one of the gunfighters asked.

"Now you hear me well," Hodge said. "Wasn't long ago that I killed the marshal's wife. I didn't mean to do it, but I did. Then I shot him. Ever since, I been in a dirty, living hell. Now I sort of clean myself up. I'm siding Sam. If he kills me afterwards, that's the way it'll be, but you two draw against Sam and me or you don't draw at all."

The two gunfighters glanced at one another, shook their heads sadly and turned around. They walked their horses, mounted and rode off. A long, long sigh went up from the people who were now beginning to crowd around.

Sam said, "Thanks, Hodge."

"You want me to oblige you now, Sam? You owe me nothing."

"I'm riding back to my ranch. I want you to ride with me."

"Oh them two skunks will high-tail it. They won't set up no ambush."

"I'm not afraid of that. I'm not asking you to ride with me because I need your gun. I just want to talk to a friend. The only one I have in this Godforsaken town, except for a girl."

"You're calling me a friend? Maybe I remembered wrong. Maybe I shot you in the head instead of the leg."

"I'm calling you friend, and I never meant it more in my life. Will you ride?"

"Yes. Yes, I'll ride."

"Then let's get out of here before I lose what brains I got left and start shooting up this whole rotten town."

Sam stopped to face Charlie and Hank. "You have nothing to fear from me, neither of you. You're no worse than anybody else here. Let the shooting and the killing keep on. It makes no difference to me. I'm not a part of this town any more. If things get worse, I'll move away because the stink of Winter Gap will reach all the way out to my ranch and I won't like it.

"Forbes, your son is in the cell. The door's unlocked. He's too yellow to come out. Hang him, or hang a badge on him. I don't care which."

Sam looked for Louise, but her house and her bakeshop were both dark. With Hodge walking silently beside him, Sam went to the livery stable and found his horse saddled and ready. They picked up Hodge's mount and both men rode out in the silence, side by side.

SIXTEEN

IN the clear night, the prairie smelled fresh and clean. The horses moved slowly, sensing that their riders were in a contemplative mood and in no hurry. For a full mile, Sam said nothing and Hodge kept silent.

Then Sam glanced at him with a half-smile on his face. "Hodge, I hated you like no man I ever knew. I swore I'd kill you on sight. But I was dead wrong. You didn't kill Amanda. The town did. It was your gun, maybe, but you were free to use it because nobody gave a damn. You didn't try to kill her. I'm sure you didn't want to."

"After it happened," Hodge said, "I would have given my own life if that could have brought her back."

"I believe you. So you shot me. But I was set to kill you. You were lucky I wasn't wearing a gun."

"I thought so, too—and then a little later, I wished to God that you had been wearing one."

"All right. We won't talk of it again. Where you headed, Hodge?"

"Anywhere. I had no intention of going back to Winter Gap, but I was drinking and moping around a saloon where young Forbes was acting like a rooster, and I heard him ask two gun-fighters to go with him to Winter Gap to kill you. Seems Wayne had heard from his father. I horned in because I wanted to find out what it was all about and I hoped, maybe, I might be able to do something that would let me sleep better at night. That boy of yours—Jason—I heard about him, too."

"I know you must have. We're going to have a problem, Hodge."

"Why? What problem?"

"Jase is going to have to get used to the idea that the man who killed his mother is a friend."

"Not me," Hodge replied promptly. "I'm not riding to your ranch, Sam. I couldn't face the boy."

"If he has to face you, there's not much you can do but have it out with him. Jase has to learn to grow up some. This won't hurt him."

"He still scared when he rides to town?"

"Yes—and it's not cowardice."

Hodge said thoughtfully, "If I could maybe get him to like me, or at least forgive me for what I did, then some of that fear might go away. What do you think?"

"We can try, Hodge."

By the time they reached the ranch and saw the lights in the house, Hodge was almost as nervous as Jason would have been in town. Then Sam knew why Louise's house and bakery had been in darkness. She'd ridden out here, wisely prepared to be with Jason in case Sam didn't come back. They'd both been waiting in fear and impatience, and now they came running out as the two riders turned off the wagon road.

Louise went unashamedly into Sam's arms and clung to him and cried a little, and then she kissed him and said she was sorry to be acting so foolish and silly. She saw Hodge then and stared at him, then looked toward Jason who had rushed to greet his father, but skidded to a stop when he recognized Hodge.

Sam kept an arm around Louise as he approached Jason. He said, "Jase, this may be a little hard for you to understand right now, but I want you to welcome Hodge."

"He killed my mother. He shot you."

"He could have killed me, too, that day. He shot your mother by accident, Jase."

"That don't make no difference to me."

"I'll ride," Hodge said.

"No—you'll stay. Jase, tonight I had to face two gun-fighters and not one soul in Winter Gap would step out to help me except Hodge—whom I had sworn to kill and he knew it. He sided me. Likely he saved my life and I can tell you this, he's as sorry for what happened to your mother as you are or I am."

"He sided you?" Jason asked, as if he couldn't believe it.

"Jase," Louise added, "I've known Hodge all my life. He's not bad. He's not a killer. He didn't mean to shoot Amanda."

Jason backed away slowly. Hodge turned to his horse.

"It's all right, Jason," he said. "I don't blame you. I'm sorry for what happened—what I did. I'd do anything to put all the pieces back like they used to be. Guess if I was you, I'd get me a gun and shoot the man who killed your ma. So long, Sam. Ma'am, thanks for speaking up for me."

Jason said, "I guess it'd be all right for you to stay, Hodge."

Hodge rubbed his face violently. "You sure about that, Jase?"

"Yes . . . Yes, I guess I'm sure. If you sided Pa, I guess you sorta made up for—that other . . ."

"You know," Hodge said to all of them, "I been hoping there'd be some way I could pay for what I did. Siding you, Sam, is nothing. I'd have done that, anyway—but if I could work here, good, hard, sweating work—I'd feel I was paying back. I'd feel that I'd be doing some of the things that Amanda would have done. I'd feel much better if you let me stay, Jase."

"Sure, you can stay," Jase said, and walked slowly away.

"Think it'll work, Sam?" Hodge asked.

"I think so."

"Might do Jason a lot of good," Louise added.

"It may take some time, though," Sam said. "Meantime, you can use the old bunkhouse, Hodge. It'll take a little cleaning up. Things been going to pot here lately, but that's going to change."

"You won't go back as marshal?" Louise asked.

"Not for any reason, Louise. If you could have seen the way they all backed down. A whole town. They don't want law and quiet. Leastwise, they sure don't want me."

Hodge leaned against the fence and rolled a cigarette. "Funny thing," he said, "but that day in town when that shooting happened, I was hoping somebody would show up and stop me from being a fool. If there'd been a marshal to make me toe the line, I'd have knuckled under with no argument. Lots of these gunfights can be stopped by a word from the right man, especially if he wears a badge."

"But the town has to want a lawman to get one," Sam said. "I just proved you can't make a town like the law if they haven't asked for it. It's just no use."

"You tried, Sam," Louise said. "It was partly my fault in talking you into it, but I was so sure Winter Gap would see things our way. I could have sworn half the town would have backed you up in anything."

"Just one thing I'm glad of," Sam said. "I didn't have to kill anybody. Thanks for coming out here to keep Jase company, Louise. I'll hitch up the rig and take you back. That's better'n riding alone in this dark."

"Thank you, Sam. Hodge, I'm really happy about your coming back and the way things have worked out for you and Sam. I hope Jase gets used to the idea, too."

Hodge moved away, toward the barn. "I'll get the rig ready. Sam."

After Sam and Louise had ridden off, with Louise's horse tied behind the rig, Hodge turned toward the old bunkhouse. He was passing the house when Jason came to the door.

"Got coffee on," Jason called. "Louise brought a mess of bakery. Guess I can't eat it all, Hodge."

Hodge walked slowly into the house and solemnly sat down while Jason poured the coffee. They ate in silence, Hodge appreciating the buttery goodness of Louise's pastry by smiling at Jason.

"I been thinking," Jason said, "that it wasn't your fault. The bullet went wild and Ma was there, that's all. It coulda been anybody."

"Too bad it wasn't one of them stuffed shirts in town," Hodge said bitterly.

"We could sure use a hand around here," Jason said.

"You got one."

"You think Pa didn't do so good as marshal? I mean—is the town going to be just as all-fired mean and dangerous as it used to be?"

"I'm afraid so. Don't blame everybody in Winter Gap, Jase. It's just that people like Hank Forbes and Charlie Mooregrove are running things. Someday it'll change and what Sam did will help bring the change all the faster."

"You know I can't ride in there any more, Hodge?"

"I heard. I'm sorry."

"Pa's worried. I got to go to school and—I just can't, Hodge. I get sick even thinking about it."

"I'll help you all I can, Jase. You're scared of a memory of something bad. I don't blame you—because the same kind of feeling's been keeping me from having a night's sleep ever since it happened."

"I guess you better turn in then, Hodge. Pa's a driving man when it comes to work, and we're half a season behind already."

SEVENTEEN

THEN, for an entire month, Sam found comfort and pleasure in operating his ranch as it should be run. His angry decision to sell, even burn the place, had left him. As he told Louise, there was too much to lose in giving up now, and he was sure that what had happened in town would make little difference. His own mind was clear that he had done his level best and if he failed, the fault lay with the town and not with him.

Hodge and Jason worked side by side. Once Sam unexpectedly came upon them as they stood at Amanda's grave. He wisely retreated because what went on at that moment was strictly between Jason and Hodge. From this, Sam hoped, Hodge would find a certain amount of peace and Jase would take another great step in the process of growing up. It might even help Jase overcome his terror of riding to Winter Gap.

The ranch itself began to show the results of their work. Louise rode out often with news from the town. Young Wayne Forbes had ridden away, vowing he'd never come back. Charlie's Gold Eagle was as noisy as ever. There were a few shots fired by rambunctious cowhands with too much to drink, but there'd been no gunfights, no vicious battles. A few families had moved in and others were coming. Six new houses had been built and there was a new general store which, surprisingly, took a great deal of business away from Hank Forbes.

"It just strikes me," Louise said, "that folks believe Hank Forbes was to blame for much of what happened and they're letting him know it."

"He had his own way long enough. Kind of strange though, the town hasn't gone hog-wild like it used to be."

"I don't know, Sam. Maybe folks took a lesson from what you tried to do for them, whether they realize it or not. I think they miss you."

"They sure better get used to that," Sam said grimly. "I even hate to go in for supplies."

"Where's Jase?" she asked.

"Out with Hodge. They get along fine and Hodge does more

than his share of work. You were right about Hodge too—he's no wild-eyed maverick looking for a fight with everybody he meets."

Louise said, "I keep talking to the women about a regular lawman and they're more for it than ever. I tell them how Hodge could have been stopped that day. Just let enough of them pester their menfolk long enough and we'll get some action. Forbes has quit trying to act as if he were mayor. Nobody would pay much attention to him, anyway, but people have no one to go to with their problems."

"Whatever they do, it's without me, Louise."

"What about Jase and school?"

"He's still afraid to ride in and I'm not going to press him. He's learning from Hodge. Not book-learning, but what he gets through his head will help him when he's a man. The book-learning will have to wait."

"I wouldn't push him, either, Sam."

Sam leveled a steady gaze on her. "Just as soon as a decent time goes by, I'll come courting you. Maybe Jase will change then."

"How do you know I haven't found someone else?" she asked mischievously.

"By the way you say hello, by your smile, by your eyes. I'm only a fool man, but I see well."

She slipped her arm under his and they made their way to the porch and stood looking out over the land that was Sam's, would be hers too, some day soon. She felt content and very happy.

By the time Hodge and Jason rode back, Louise had the table set and a hot supper waiting. She thought then, as they ate and laughed and talked, that here on this ranch, with Sam as her husband, she would envy no woman on earth.

Before long, the ranch was practically running itself. Hodge rarely went into town, Sam only when necessary and how Jason felt about going in, Sam didn't know. The subject wasn't mentioned.

Word did reach them, through Louise, and through some of the townspeople who rode by now and then and stopped for a visit, that Winter Gap was slowly reverting to its wild, boisterous days. More and more out-of-work trail hands drifted in and stayed. The weather was beginning to turn colder, some of the drifters looked for a place to stay until April. Among those would be the troublemakers, but Sam

also guessed the word had gone out that Winter Gap was a wide-open town. That news would bring the gun-fighters, the tinhorns, the riffraff.

Gradually, Sam discovered that he didn't even worry about the town or its people, save Louise. He saw her as often as possible and if her neighbors and friends wanted to call that courting, they were welcome.

The hurt of having been so fully rejected by everyone was slowly wearing off. People Sam had mentally sworn he'd never again recognize, he found himself speaking to and they answered him eagerly, as if they wanted to make amends. He ignored all such advances.

Yet he realized that one of these times something would happen that he might not be able to ignore. One evening while he, Jason and Hodge sat on the porch, resting after a hard day and a good meal, they saw a rider coming up the wagon road from town. When Sam identified him as Charlie Mooregrove, he knew something serious was responsible for Charlie's coming. Until now, Charlie hadn't shown the slightest desire to talk to Sam Bishop.

Charlie dismounted, tied his horse to the fence and waddled up to the porch like a man who wasn't used to riding this far. He set one foot on the porch steps and looked up at the two men and the boy.

Charlie tested the reception he was going to get by saying, "You ain't no more surprised to see me than I am to be here."

"I can't see any reason not to welcome you, Charlie," Sam said, "even if you have been a pigheaded fool in the past."

"Pigheaded—yep. I been that. I'm not so sure about being a fool because what I did was the right way as I saw it."

"What do we have to talk about then, Charlie?"

"As I saw it—some time back."

"What's eating you?" Sam asked.

"The more I think about having a lawman in Winter Gap, the more I know you were right, Sam. Lots of people think the same, now. I came to ask that you pin on that old busted star and come back. This time I'll fix it so you'll be duly sworn soon as we have somebody legally qualified to do it, and until then we'll back you, no matter what happens."

"Well now, that's very nice," Sam said. "A little late, but very nice. I want no part of it."

"Shucks, Sam, I know how bad we treated you, especially

me, but that's all in the past. We want to start over again."

"Even Hank Forbes?"

Charlie shook his head, "Not Hank. He's dead against you. But all the saloonkeepers go along with me."

"Charlie," Sam said with quiet and great satisfaction, "I wasted a lot of time and I took a lot of abuse trying to give Winter Gap some law. I won't go through it again. So ride back and get yourself another boy."

"Think it over," Charlie said. "This is what you wanted mighty bad not long ago."

"When I stood up to three gunslingers and nobody sided me, that's when I lost interest, Charlie. So we'll just forget the whole thing. Leastwise, I will."

"Think about it," Charlie repeated.

He refused to stay for coffee or to chat, and they watched him ride off. Sam traveled a toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other and glanced at Hodge.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Something's happened the town can't control," Hodge said.

"Just what I thought."

"Is there going to be more shooting and killing?" Jason asked.

"I don't know, Jase. I suppose so."

"I wish there wouldn't be. I sorta got—kinda ready to try a ride in, but now I'm scared all over again."

"Uh-huh," Sam said with a worried look. "Hodge, you want to mosey in and see what's up?"

"Nothing else to do," Hodge said, in the voice of a man very eager to get going. Jason ran off the porch to the barn and started to saddle a horse for Hodge. After he'd ridden off, Jason rejoined his father.

"Likely won't amount to much," Sam said confidently.

"Charlie scares easy."

"Will you go in if they need you bad, Pa?"

"Not likely."

"Even if Louise needs you?"

"That'd be different. Seems to me I shouldn't have left her alone this long, Jase. I got to do something about that. For you, mostly. Seeing you can't get to school, Louise could teach you."

"She does, every time she rides out. I think I learn more that way than I would in any fool schoolhouse, Pa."

"Maybe—but you've got to learn to live with other boys and girls, too. We'll see."

"Do we wait for Hodge to come back, Pa?"

"Might as well. Made up my mind, Jase, that nothing's going to make me leave this ranch. For a while I thought, maybe, with the town wild as it is, I wouldn't want to stay on here, but I was wrong. Winter Gap will tame down. Most frontier towns are wild, but they grow peaceful and quiet after a while."

"Without somebody making them tame down?"

"The folks do it themselves. They don't even realize it's happening, sometimes. Before too long, you'll ride in with me and you won't mind."

"I hope it'll be pretty soon," Jason said.

They were alternately quiet and full of chatter about the ranch for the next hour, but their conversation stopped abruptly when they saw Hodge riding back. He was burning the wind, and that meant trouble.

Hodge wiped road dust off his face as he walked to the porch. "All hell's busted loose," he said. "Been a week now since three owlhooters rode into town and started getting tough. Yesterday three more came in to join them."

Sam nodded slowly. "What I thought. They're drinking Charlie's whiskey and refusing to pay for it."

"They moved into the hotel, too, and so far they gunned two people. No killing—but that's bound to come. Sam I don't know these six, but I've known a lot of men like them, just as you have. They're bad clear through, and if somebody don't buck them pretty soon, they'll just about take the town over."

"It was bound to happen. Word gets around when a town is easy picking. I remember hoping to hear about towns like that when I was riding free and easy. After a while, folks will get together and drive them out. May be a good thing for the town this happened. Make them wake up."

"They're awake now," Hodge said. "They're scared, too. I didn't ask many questions or show myself, but from what I heard, it's pretty bad. Women don't go outside the door any more and they keep shotguns leaning against the kitchen wall."

"Hodge," Jason asked quickly, "did you see Louise?"

"Noticed there was a light in her shop, so I guess she's all right. Anybody got sassy with her they'll get a surprise,"

Hodge said. "She knows how to shoot, and she ain't the kind to weasel if there's trouble."

"Pa," Jase said, "go in and fetch her. Honest, if anything happened to her—like happened to Ma—"

"Hush up," Sam said curtly. "You heard Hodge say she was all right. There's nothing we can do. Nothing I will do. Danged town asked for this, now let them enjoy it."

"But Louise. She's just a woman . . ."

"I said hush up, Jase."

Jason arose abruptly and headed for the kitchen. Sam said, "Jase, I'll ride in tomorrow. I'll talk to her."

"If—she's still there," Jason said with a great sob welling from his throat. He slammed the door as he went inside.

"Boy's got a lot of spunk," Hodge commented. "Happens to be right, too."

"You think I should go in tonight?"

"Tomorrow morning, Sam. Them trail bums been in town too long. Whatever they're after, they're sure going to try to get soon and then be on their way. Hell, what am I explaining all this to you for? You know how they operate."

Sam nodded. "They moved into the hotel. Means they just took it over. Means they'll use it as a headquarters. Now what would a six-man gang want with a town?"

"Money. Anything else worth shooting people for?"

"Hold the town up? A whole town?"

"It's been done," Hodge said.

"Sure has, and Winter Gap's just ripe for it. If those six are real outlaws, looting the town is the first thing they'll think of. No wonder Charlie was worried."

"I'll saddle another horse," Hodge suggested.

"Not on your life. If I go in, it'll be on business or to see Louise. If I'm interfered with, that's another matter. I'll fight my own battles, but I won't fight those of every yellow citizen in Winter Gap. I tried that once."

"You object if I ride in tomorrow morning, Sam?"

"Go ahead."

"I'll leave first thing. I better get some rest now. Good night, Sam."

Sam nodded and made himself a final cigarette. He sat there alone, looking out over the prairie faintly lit by a half moon and shadowed by cloud formations. He thought that if anyone rode out here to do any damage, or make any unreasonable demands, he'd start that old gun of his working

again. But not to protect anyone else. He remembered—and hated the memory—the time when the four young toughs had beaten him up. He could still hear the jeering laughter of the town when he'd locked up a drunk and then couldn't find the cell key. Then there'd been young Wayne Forbes and the cowardly way he shot a man and went free, anyhow.

Sam had given Winter Gap a chance to set up some effective law. He'd done it because of the memory of Amanda and for the peace of mind of Jason, but nobody would have any part of it. Now they could go to hell in a hand basket of their own making.

Sam went to bed and slept without a twinge of conscience.

EIGHTEEN

HODGE left for town directly after breakfast while Sam and Jason began their morning chores. They worked close to the house because Sam meant to make a short day of it so he could go into town himself at mid-afternoon. Jason was unusually silent, keeping busy at jobs that took him too far from where Sam worked to make conversation easy. Sam sensed that Jason did not approve of his reluctance to go into town at once and straighten things out, even if it meant tackling six outlaws. Boylike, it never occurred to Jason that the six would shoot back.

It was early afternoon before Hodge returned, again riding at top speed. When Jason spotted him, the boy raced for the barn and came out lugging another saddle as he headed for the corral. He was saddling a fresh horse for Hodge before he reached the ranch.

"It's bad," Hodge said. "All six are holed up in the hotel with eight, maybe ten people as hostages. They say they'll shoot the folks they're holding and then fire the whole town, unless everybody pitches in and makes up enough money to buy them off."

"I still say it's the lookout of men like Hank, Charlie and Glover."

"Sam," Hodge said solemnly, "they wouldn't do so good going in after Louise."

"They've got her?" Sam could feel the anger welling up within him.

Hodge nodded. "This morning they wanted grub sent in and they told old Adam Victor to fetch some. You know Adam—he's just a swamper in one of the saloons. He didn't know what they were talking about. Adam was on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. They cut him down with about a dozen bullets. All of them took shots at him."

"What about Louise?"

"She offered to supply them with food and she brought a lot of stuff into the hotel. But she hasn't come out, Sam."

"Jase," Sam called. "Harness the rig."

Jase went loping into the barn. Hodge seemed doubtful. "Sam, somebody has to stay here. If those outlaws are made to run for it, they'll sure head here first and burn you out. Seems they know all about you. If they do come and Jase is alone . . ."

"He's riding in with us, Hodge."

"You think that's wise? With Jase like he is?"

"Hodge, you and I are the only ones who can handle a thing like this. We have to work together. I agree, if these men get away they may come here. Jase has to go with us. If he gets sick and scared, that's how it has to be. But all three of us are riding."

Sam rushed into the house and strapped on his gunbelt. He had only half a belt of cartridges, but he didn't stop to get more. There wasn't time. Hodge helped Jason and when they left, Hodge rode on ahead.

Sam said, "I don't like to do this, Jase."

"You can't help it, Pa. Just make sure nothing happens to Louise."

"I'll sure try. One thing—if you find you can't ride in, I'll let you off, but you've got to keep out of sight, do you understand?"

"I'm going on in," Jason said stubbornly.

Sam's doubts increased as they neared the town. When the first of the houses came into view, Jason was chalk-white and beginning to tremble. He held onto the rig with both hands and kept his eyes straight forward. Sam had the horse let out for all it was worth and could spare little time to watch Jason, but he heard the boy retch and Sam had to steel himself to let the boy go on.

"In.—all right, Pa," Jason insisted. "Keep going—please . . ."

Sam ran the rig to the side of the road at the end of Main Street, out of range of gunfire. He helped Jason off the seat. He could feel every muscle in the boy's body trembling. He set him down and kept his hands on his shoulders.

"Hodge is near the hotel waiting for me," he said. "You stay here, Jase. There's no need for you to go any farther."

Jason couldn't speak. His teeth would have rattled if he tried to, so he nodded and stood there rigid and fearful as Sam ran down the street. After a few moments, Jason began to walk. He was stiff-legged. Every part of him was against moving down the street except that part of his brain and his heart from which a man's courage comes. He went on, step by step.

Hodge waited for Sam directly across the street from the hotel. No one else was in sight. Sam ran alongside the building, drew no fire, and squatted down beside Hodge in a doorway.

"They gave the town one more hour, Sam, and then they start shooting the people in there one by one."

"Seen anything of Louise?"

"No. Neither has anybody else. Hank Forbes is going around making everybody kick in. Every dollar in town is going into the poke, but even if they give it all up, those six skunks won't leave without firing the town and shooting it up. They'll have to, so nobody can form a posse and light out after them."

Sam was studying the hotel and the adjoining buildings. "We can't rush the place, Hodge. They'd cut us down before we took a dozen steps. But there's a way, maybe . . ."

"The hotel roof," Hodge nodded. "Always wondered why they put a door up there. Sure safer than charging them from here, but they'll know we're up there, Sam, and they won't like it nohow."

"That's what I'm figuring on. They'll think we're a couple of townspeople with a little more nerve than the others and they'll send two or three men to the roof to clean us off there. You know what they'll find, Hodge. Two men as tough and ready to kill as they are."

"If there were only three or four of us," Hodge murmured. "But six guns against our two . . . dunno, Sam, but I sure mean to find out how the odds will work."

"I'll skitter around, go down the alley, cross the street and come at the hotel from the back . . ."

"How do you get to the roof, Sam?"

"Through Forbes' store. It's next door to the hotel, the roof is about even. A good jump . . ."

"If we can surprise them . . ."

"Hold it, Hodge. The front door is opening . . ."

A frightened girl of about eight came out first, followed by one of the six outlaws. He was half drunk, dirty, cocksure and primed for trouble.

He held the girl back and spoke in a loud voice. "I'm heading down for whiskey. Anybody stops me, this kid gets it first. Got it?"

It must have seemed to him that he spoke to an empty town. There was no answer until he moved on down the street with the girl at his side.

"Cover the hotel windows," Sam said crisply.

Hodge nodded and drew his gun. Sam stepped out to the middle of the sidewalk. "You," he shouted, "try me!"

The outlaw had been too sure of himself. His gun wasn't in his fist and Sam had one other break. When his appearance startled the outlaw, he let go the girl so he could reach, and the girl made one wild run for it. The outlaw couldn't take a shot at her, with this tall and steely-eyed man threatening him. He gave a wild yowl and went for his gun. Sam shot him twice, aiming to kill. The outlaw fell over backward and lay there, within easy view of the hotel, within gunshot of any of its windows.

A man appeared at one window, but Hodge was waiting for that. Hodge fired and the man darted back. Then Sam went racing for the alley and Hodge joined him in back of the buildings. They didn't speak, just went running north until they estimated they might not be seen from the hotel if they crossed the street at this point. Sam went first and drew no fire. Hodge followed. In a few moments they were at the back door to Forbes' store.

Sam smashed the window in the door with his gun barrel, reached through, unlocked the door, and they went in quickly. They moved fast now because they heard threatening shouts from the outlaws directed at the townspeople.

They ran up the steps to the second floor storeroom and found there was no exit to the roof, but by stepping on a window sill on the side of the store away from the hotel, they

could grasp the rooftop easily and pull themselves up. Sam went first again, lay flat, let his arms hang down so that Hodge could grab his hands. In a moment, Hodge was beside him on the roof.

They crossed to the hotel side, judged the distance between the buildings, retreated as far as possible to get up speed and then Sam made the running jump successfully. Hodge barely made it and Sam had to grab him to keep him from falling back over the edge.

Below, they could hear men coming up the hotel steps to investigate the thumps. Sam and Hodge separated so that they covered the roof door from two directions. When it opened, the first man to appear died with two bullets through his head, so close together they looked like only one slug.

The others were far more careful. Sam and Hodge had to flatten out to escape the gunfire. They had so little time. Once the outlaws concluded they might be trapped, they'd start killing their hostages. Sam was grim-faced, more worried than he'd ever been in his life. He signaled Hodge he had to reload and then he discovered he had six cartridges for one full load and only four more left in his belt. He unstrapped the belt and held it up for Hodge to see.

That was the moment when one of the outlaws made a try at gunplay. He missed, but he saw the gunbelt almost empty and he knew what that meant.

Sam groaned at the idea of their knowing how handicapped he was, but then he thought it might give the hostages a little more time. The outlaws would have to clean out this menace from above before they could manage any escape, and they wouldn't shoot their hostages until the last possible moment.

Sam fired carefully but he was at a disadvantage. The outlaws could make him shoot by taking a few chances, while he couldn't afford to waste a bullet.

Hodge, too, was running out of cartridges. Sam stuffed the last four into his gun and then took a chance in running to the front of the building to throw the empty shell belt into the street as a signal—if anyone was abroad to see it.

Hodge winged one man, but it cost him three cartridges and he had just one full load left. One outlaw showed himself to snap-fire six bullets at them. Sam fired twice. Hodge lost his temper and fired all but one slug. The outlaw hooted in derision and drew back.

Hodge crept over to join Sam. "They'll keep showing them-

selves until we don't shoot and then they'll know they have us. How many cartridges left in your gun?"

"Two. And you?"

"One, blast it. We can't even take them all if they charge us."

"We'll take as many as we can and then use our hands," Sam said. "We're slipping, Hodge. We should have known we needed plenty of ammunition."

"Who took time to think?" Hodge asked.

On the street below, Jason had worked his painful way closer to the hotel, disobeying his father. The fear in him wouldn't permit him to stay alone where he had been left. He thought there might be someone he could turn to, but the street was empty, except for the body of the old swamper lying across the sidewalk, the man who had been murdered earlier in the day. Then he saw the outlaw in the middle of the road, and he also saw his father's empty shell belt.

Jason didn't grasp the significance of it immediately, but then as he estimated what the empty shell belt meant, his trembling grew less and less.

He recalled the hurry in which they'd all left the ranch. He thought back and knew the belt hadn't even been half-filled with cartridges. Once he'd taken pride in seeing that every loop was filled, but Sam had been touchy about his going near the gun lately, so he hadn't attended to it. He recalled hearing quite a bit of shooting on the rooftop and then he realized that his father and Hodge might be running out of cartridges, and this was Sam's way of letting it be known.

Jason looked around frantically for someone to ask for help, but no one showed. There was a fusillade of shots on the roof, shortly followed by only one shot. Sam and Hodge would be completely out in a moment.

Jason eyed the dead outlaw in the road. That was close to the spot where his mother had dropped with a bullet through her, and had held onto his hand in that last frantic attempt to protect him.

Jason crouched, suddenly ran across the street and fell beside the dead man. He'd believed that if he ever saw a dead person again, he'd probably die himself, but he was able to lie there, snuggled against the man, seeing the blood that came from his body. Yet Jason remained calm and all his trembling had ceased.

Jason slipped a hand under the dead man, found the buckle, opened it and rolled the man over so he could snatch the shell belt from beneath him.

He grasped the heavy belt, noticing it was filled with cartridges. He raised his eyes and studied the front of the hotel. If he was being watched, they knew what he was up to by now and they'd start shooting. Yet he had to get up and run. Run clear across that wide open area to the alley. He'd be a perfect target every step of the way and even worse, once they saw him, they'd guess what he was going to try to do and they'd probably go charging onto the roof to finish off Sam and Hodge before Jason could supply them with more ammunition.

Jason threw the shell belt over his shoulder and started to run. He expected to feel the impact of a bullet any second, but there were no shots. Winded, his lungs burning, he reached the alley and kept going.

He found the broken window and the open door at the rear of Forbes' store and followed Sam's and Hodge's route. He spotted the raised window, looked out of it and up. He refused to look down. He made certain the belt was balanced on his shoulder and then he stepped onto the sill.

Above him he heard two shots from two different guns. They couldn't have many bullets left now. He reached up with one hand, was just tall enough to grasp the edge of the roof. He gave one mighty hoist, got his other hand on the ledge and then painfully hauled himself up.

In a moment he lay flat on the rooftop with his eyes tightly closed. The only comforting thought he had was that the filled shell belt was beside him. He opened his eyes slowly, filled with fear of what he was going to see.

Hodge and his father were side by side, facing the hotel roof door. Their guns were drawn and they waited. Jason opened his mouth to yell, but was afraid he might give warning, so he removed enough cartridges to fill two guns. He fumbled in his pocket and found a handkerchief his father had warned him to replace with a fresh one two days ago. He tied the corners together around the bullets, crawled over the rooftop, and then threw a loose bullet to the hotel roof as a signal to his father.

Sam whirled, his gun level. Then he opened his mouth in a silent cheer and waved. He found the bullet Jason had

tossed. The boy held up the cartridge-weighted handkerchief, went to the edge of the roof and threw it across the alley. **Sam caught it.**

Hodge waved. They quickly loaded their guns, resumed their position. Sam turned long enough to signal Jason to lie flat and Jason obeyed.

Three men came barreling out onto the hotel roof, their guns blazing, certain that Sam and Hodge had only one or two slugs left. Sam and Hodge began shooting when the third man appeared in the doorway. He died first. The other pair, suddenly trapped, died where they stood.

Sam rushed across the roof, booted the dead man in the doorway to one side, raced down the steps to the second floor of the hotel. There he found the sixth and last outlaw. He stood with his arms stretched as high as he could get them. His gun was on the floor. Sam smashed him on the head with his gun barrel, and then he called out Louise's name and stood above the groaning man with his gun slanted down. If Louise didn't come, the last bandit was going to die.

But she came—up the stairs in a mad rush that ended in Sam's arms. It was over. When Sam, Hodge and Louise reached the street, Jason was already there to greet them, and the townspeople came out and stood quietly around.

At Sam's order, Jason ran up the street and drove the rig back down it, to where they waited. Hodge meanwhile, had fetched his own horse and had mounted.

Sam helped Louise onto the rig, climbed aboard himself and Jason handled the reins. They rode down the street, not looking at the silent people, at Hank Forbes or Charlie Mooregrove, at Judge Glover or any of the others.

They were halfway to the ranch before anyone spoke. Jason said, "Pa, I wasn't scared. I did all right, didn't I?"

"Nobody could have done better."

"I'm proud of you," Louise said. "Of all of you."

"I waited too long," Sam told her. "I was too danged proud to forget the past."

"But you did come, Sam. I wonder what will happen to Winter Gap now."

Hodge rode alongside them and he leaned down from the saddle. "Ma'am, I wouldn't mind riding back if I could wear you pa's star."

"Hodge, that's a great idea," Sam said. He fumbled in his

pocket and produced the four-pointed star. He passed it up to Hodge. "That's a brave man's badge, Hodge."

"I know. Reason why I took my time asking for it. Sam—you don't want to wear it?"

"No, Hodge, I've got me a ranch to run, a son to bring up."

Louise smiled for the first time that day. "He's going to be very busy, Hodge. He's going to have a real family."

"You see?" Sam said helplessly. "I got nothing to say in the matter."

"I'll go back then," Hodge said, "and sorta clean up the pieces."

He wheeled his horse, leaned over and used his heels. Sam twisted around to watch him travel. He said, "I envy him."

"Do you really, Sam?" Louise asked.

"Well, sort of, but then I suppose he envies me, too. Because I got everything in the world now."

Jason seemed to think so, too, and he was polite and gentlemanly enough to keep his eyes on the road ahead of them.

The Marshal



ONE SHOT from a blazing six-gun in the hand of a blind-drunk cowboy had changed Sam Bishop from a peaceful rancher into a vengeful lawman, a human machine of destruction.

That day, too, changed the town of Winter Gap from a free-and-easy cow-country settlement to a town divided. Winter Gap would know no peace—until Sam Bishop no rest—until Sam's sworn vow against the man who had gunned down Amanda Bishop was fulfilled.

